

NELLY BROOKE

BY
FLORENCE MARRYAT
(MRS ROSS CHURCH)



ALPHABET

W.

W.

W

M.

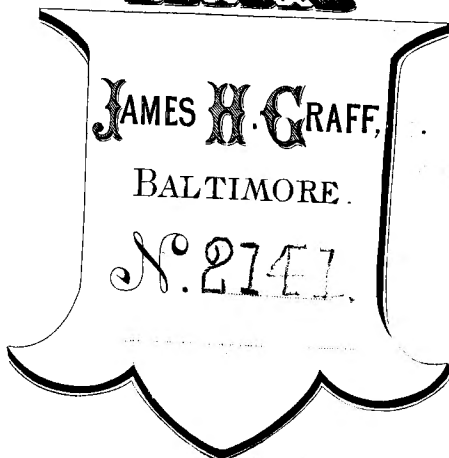
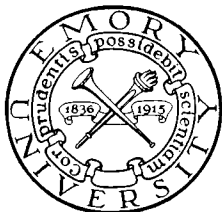
M.

M.

TH

LEARNERS.

ROBERT W WOODRUFF
LIBRARY



hers.

ADERS. &c.

OK.

NG

ured

250

100

AND

etters
Little

Demy 8vo, price 1s., cloth cover.

EVERLASTING VICTORIA PRIMER. 150

Illustrations, printed on fine linen.

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

Frederick Warne & Co., Publishers.

WARNE'S ATLASES,

Fully coloured, and strongly bound.

In imperial folio, half morocco, £2 2s.

THE MODERN ATLAS OF THE EARTH. With an Introduction to Physical and Historical Geography, and an Alphabetical Index of the Latitudes and Longitudes of 70,000 places. 60 coloured Maps. By WILLIAM HUGHES, F.R.G.S.

In imperial folio, cloth, gilt edges, 15s., or half morocco, £1 1s.

FAMILY ATLAS OF MODERN GEOGRAPHY 37
Coloured Maps, with a Physical Introduction and Consulting Index of the Latitudes and Longitudes of 30,000 places. By WILLIAM HUGHES, F.R.G.S.

In super-royal 8vo, price 10s. 6d., cloth, gilt edges.

THE COLLEGE ATLAS. Containing 33 Maps.

In super-royal 8vo, price 5s., cloth, gilt edges.

THE JUNIOR ATLAS. Containing 14 Maps.

In super-royal 8vo, price 10s. 6d., half bound.

THE COLLEGE CLASSIC ATLAS.

In super-royal 8vo, price 5s., cloth, gilt edges.

THE JUNIOR CLASSIC ATLAS. 15 Maps.

In square imperial, price 1s., sewed wrapper; or 1s. 6d., cloth.

WARNE'S SHILLING ATLAS. Containing 12 Maps.

Uniform, price 1s. each, sewed, picture cover.

OUTLINES TO WARNE'S SHILLING ATLAS.
PROJECTION TO WARNE'S SHILLING ATLAS.

A New Popular History of England.

In fcap. 8vo, 1s. 6d., boards, or 2s. cloth.

ARCHDEACON SMITH'S HISTORY OF ENGLAND.

With Notes, Portraits of Sovereigns, Index, &c.

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

Frederick Warne & Co., Publishers.

THE POPULAR
ENGLISH SPELLING BOOKS.

In fcap. 8vo, NINEPENCE each, strongly bound.

MAVOR'S BRITISH SPELLING BOOK.

GUY'S
CARPENTER'S " with Meanings.
FENNING'S UNIVERSAL "
VYSE'S NEW LONDON "
MARKHAM'S USEFUL "

*Also, Superior Editions, in post 8vo, price ONE SHILLING
(cloth) of*

MAVOR'S SPELLING BOOK.

GUY'S BRITISH SPELLING BOOK.

CARPENTER'S Ditto, with full Accentuation.

In demy 8vo, price 1s., cloth, gilt lettering.

WARNE'S
VICTORIA PICTURE SPELLING BOOK.

With Three Hundred and Eighty-four Illustrations.

This Edition is produced with every modern improvement that can be brought into practice in the publishing of a book. Carefully edited, with a large quantity of original matter, well printed on good paper, and solidly bound, it is very far in advance of anything yet in use. In its 160 pages it contains the necessary groundwork of a primary education, and as a National School Book has an immense sale.

In fcap. 8vo, 9d., strongly bound.

WALKINGHAME'S ARITHMETIC;

MODERNIZED, REVISED, AND CORRECTED,

By E. LETHBRIDGE, M.A.

Late Scholar and Exhibitioner of Exeter College, Oxford, and Special
Tutor to the Civil Service Examinations.

THE KEY TO WALKINGHAME, 2s. 6d.

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

NELLY BROOKE.

A Homely Story.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT

(MRS ROSS CHURCH).

“Love is strong as death.”



LONDON:
FREDERICK WARNE & CO.,
BEDFORD STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1869.

PRINTED BY BALLANTYNE AND COMPANY
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. NIGEL BROOKE FINDS HIS WAY TO LITTLE BICKTON, . . .	1
II. AND IS INTRODUCED TO HIS NEW RELATIONS, . . .	7
III. IN WHICH THE COUSINS DISCUSS CERTAIN FAMILY MATTERS, . . .	14
IV. NIGEL BROOKE FALLS IN LOVE WITH A COUNTRY LIFE, . . .	20
V. AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW, . . .	27
VI. NELLY CONSENTS TO GO TO ORPINGTON, . . .	36
VII. HOW NELLY SPENT HER FIVE POUNDS, . . .	43
VIII. MRS BROOKE GIVES HER OPINION OF THE MATTER, . . .	51
IX. THE FIRST EVENING AT ORPINGTON CHASE, . . .	57
X. MRS BROOKE CHANGES HER OPINION, . . .	66
XI. NELLY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE, . . .	73
XII. NELLY AND NIGEL HAVE OCCASION TO "MAKE IT UP AGAIN," . . .	83
XIII. THE WIND SHIFTS ROUND TO THE ORIGINAL QUARTER, . . .	92
XIV. "WHAT COULD HE MEAN BY IT?" . . .	98
XV. NELLY'S WELCOME HOME, . . .	108
XVI. ROBERT BROOKE TELLS HIS SISTER HALF THE TRUTH, . . .	114
XVII. NELLY HOLDS A VIGIL WITH THE VICAR, . . .	121
XVIII. NIGEL BROOKE WRITES A LETTER TO HIS COUSIN, . . .	130
XIX. AND RECEIVES A GRATEFUL ANSWER, . . .	138
XX. NELLY AND BERTIE ARE LEFT TO THEMSELVES, . . .	144
XXI. HOW THEY LIVED AT BICKTON FARM, . . .	156
XXII. SOME ONE COMES WITH THE PRIMROSES, . . .	164
XXIII. DR MONKTON'S VISIT AWAKENS BOTH HOPE AND FEAR, . . .	174
XXIV. FOR WHOM DOES HE COME? . . .	182
XXV. NELLY'S EYES ARE OPENED, . . .	190
XXVI. THE DOCTOR PUTS A QUESTION, AND RECEIVES HIS ANSWER, . . .	197
XXVII. WHICH DOES NOT APPEAR TO GIVE GENERAL SATISFACTION, . . .	204

CHAP.	PAGE
XXVIII. MR RAY IS ENLISTED INTO BERTIE'S SERVICE,	212
XXIX. NELLY IS BESET ON EVERY SIDE,	220
XXX. SUBDUED—NOT CONQUERED,	228
XXXI. THE CATHEDRAL TOWN OF HILSTONE,	236
XXXII. MRS FILMER'S JACKAL,	244
XXXIII. NIGEL BROOKE THINKS THERE IS SAFETY IN FLIGHT,	253
XXXIV. MRS PROWSE FINDS HER REIGN IS OVER,	263
XXXV. THE MEETING OF THE SISTERS-IN-LAW,	270
XXXVI. THE FIRST BITTER DROP IN NELLY'S CUP,	280
XXXVII. WHAT THE TWINS THOUGHT OF THEIR NEW HOME,	288
XXXVIII. THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW IS HIGHLY OFFENDED,	294
XXXIX. NELLY IS TAKEN TO TASK,	305
XL. AND RESOLVES TO DO HER DUTY,	314
XLI. THE AMATEUR CHORAL SOCIETY OF HILSTONE,	322
XLII. BERTIE SHOWS THE EXTENT OF HIS GRATITUDE,	333
XLIII. NELLY AND NIGEL BROOKE MEET AGAIN,	340
XLIV. MRS CLARENCE RESIGNS HER OFFICE,	348
XLV. DR MONKTON'S SENTIMENTS APPEAR TO HAVE UNDERGONE A CHANGE,	357
XLVI. OLD AGGIE BECOMES COMMUNICATIVE,	365
XLVII. THUG SLEEPS ON THE LANDING FOR THE LAST TIME,	373
XLVIII. DR MONKTON'S REVENGE,	381
XLIX. NELLY AND BERTIE ARE PARTED,	387
L. THE PROPHECIES OF MRS PROWSE ARE NOT VERIFIED,	396
LI. THE BROTHER AND SISTER MEET AGAIN,	405
LII. IN WHICH NELLY LEARNS THE HISTORY OF HER BIRTH,	416
LIII. TAKE ME BACK TO LITTLE BICKTON,	423
LIV. THE SPIRIT OF THUG IS AVENGED,	432

NELLY BROOKE.



CHAPTER I.

NIGEL BROOKE FINDS HIS WAY TO LITTLE BICKTON.

ON a rainy night in August, some twenty years ago, a jaded horse might have been seen painfully attempting to drag the antiquated vehicle, to which he was attached, up the steep acclivity of an unfrequented road in Kent.

The weather had been unusually sultry for many weeks past, and a violent storm of thunder and lightning had been succeeded by an overwhelming shower of rain,—rain which, having commenced by falling at distinct intervals in large, warm, heavy drops, had culminated in a down-pour, which appeared unceasing.

Although but eight o'clock the night was already dark, for not a star was to be seen in the frowning sky ; and the uncultivated country by which the road was bordered, served to make the picture still more desolate.

The hill up which the tired horse was labouring was composed of clay, now ankle-deep from the continued rain ; and the only signs it bore of being frequented by man were the cart-ruts, into and over which the crazy coach jolted every minute. The hedges, which on either side inclosed plantations, belonging to some far distant property, had been suffered to grow tall and straggling, and the nut-bushes, of which they were principally composed, waved their unpruned branches fantastically under the combined influence of wind and water.

Presently the wearied animal stopped of his own accord, and his master, who had been plodding patiently on foot, stopped also, and patted his heaving sides. A cloud of steam ascended from the horse's flanks, whilst his loud breathing and distended nostrils witnessed his distress.

"Poor fellow!" said the man, compassionately, "you've had a mortal tug of it, but it's a'most over now."

And then he fell to throwing his arms about and stamping his feet as he endeavoured to free himself from the clay and moisture with which he was encumbered.

A tremendous rattling at the coach-window, as some one from the inside tried to let it down, presently diverted his attention, and he joined his efforts to those of his passenger.

But the damp had caused the ill-fitting window-pane to be more obstinate than usual, and by the time his object was effected the passenger's face expressed, to say the least of it, impatience.

"How much longer are we going to be on this road?" he demanded, authoritatively. "Are you sure that you know the way to Little Bickton?"

Had the night not been so dark, or had the dim oil-lantern, which the coachman carried, been a little nearer to his face, it might have been seen that the question made him grin from ear to ear.

"Be I sure as I knows the road to Little Bickton, did you ask, sir?" he replied, in the broadest Kentish dialect. "Well! taking it from boy to man, I suppose I've been along this road, back'ards and for'ards, for better nor thirty years, and I *should* think"——

But what the country coachman "should think," his passenger never ascertained, for at that particular moment a fresh gust of wind, blowing the rain into his face with aggravated violence, caused him to pull up the window again so summarily, that the leathern strap, rendered rotten by age, came off in his hand.

"Well, he *is* impatient!" soliloquised the coachman, whose vehicle, being the only one on hire at the town of Reddington, from which he had come, was considered in those parts as rather a rapid mode of progression than otherwise. "I wonder now much faster he expects one animal to take him along a road like this here!"

And with a chirrup to his horse, which had less of cheerfulness in it than his former tone, he set the conveyance once more in motion.

Meantime, his passenger had thrown himself back on the musty cushions with an expression of disgust.

"Three hours!" he said to himself, "three hours, if I have been a minute, doing fourteen miles in this rabbit-hutch. Had I but known my way about this wilderness, I had better have walked. How my mother would laugh if she could see me at the outset of what she termed my Quixotic expedition. Such a commencement of itself is sufficient to damp the ardour of any man,—that is, if I were not sure, whatever she may say, that it is a sense of

duty, and not mere curiosity which brings me here. Yet it will take a more cordial reception from my grandfather than the last one with which he greeted my poor father, to enable me to forget the discomforts I have experienced in seeking him."

And here the soliloquist, who, fresh from a luxurious life in the East, had not been used to "roughing" it, lighted another cigar, and endeavoured under its influence to forget for a while his unpleasant position.

A little more jolting and shaking, varied by an occasional stoppage on the part of the horse, brought them at last to the summit of the hill, and then the coachman, slowly mounting his box, and gathering up his reins with the satisfied air of one who has accomplished a feat of skill, set off at a sober jog-trot along the level road.

"Thank Heaven!" was the involuntary exclamation of the inside passenger, as he felt the change in the motion.

He drew his gloved hand across the window-pane, which his breath and the smoke from his cigar had completely clouded, but he could make nothing of the surrounding landscape.

The rain was still descending steadily; the reflection of the oil-lantern, which, hung by the side of the coach-box, did duty for carriage lamps, glittered in the vast puddle through which the wheels were splashing, beyond which, strain his eyesight as he would, he could discern nothing but a black mass of space.

The hedges on either side, however, had disappeared, and from this he concluded that they were skirting a common or piece of waste land.

Presently he could distinguish lights, which seemed to gleam from cottage windows, although the atmosphere caused everything to appear misty and undefined. He became excited; he shook the window strap which he had not destroyed, with so much energy, that the window, for a wonder, responded to his efforts; the glass came down with a rattle, and the next moment his head was thrust from the open space, and his voice rung on the night air.

"Stop! stop!" he shouted to the driver, as the vehicle rolled opposite a few small houses.

"We're a'most there, sir!" said the man, encouragingly, thinking his fare's patience was at length exhausted.

"Stop! I tell you," was the only reply he received; and he stopped accordingly.

"I must make some inquiries for myself," said the gentleman, as he quickly descended; "we may jog on at this rate all night,

for aught I know to the contrary ;” and he entered the dwelling before him as he spoke.

“ Well, I *am* blessed,” remarked the coachman to the horse ; “ and we not a stone’s-throw from the house itself.”

But the gentleman did not hear this remark. The open door which he had entered belonged to a small village shop,—to one of those wonderful shops which contain everything from bacon and biting Dutch cheeses to barège dresses and bonnet-ribbons.

The window, inefficiently lighted with oil, was decorated with straw hats and children’s shoes at the top ; and pudding-eggs and pickles at the bottom ; whilst the doorway had evidently been the resting-place of sundry bales of coarse flannel and oil-cloth, which the proprietor was just engaged in packing away.

Moreover, a slit on one side of the door, with the words “ Post-Office ” rudely painted above it, showed that if not the only, this was the most important, shop in the place.

The nostrils of the visitor involuntarily closed themselves as he stooped his tall head beneath the doorway, and became aware of the mingled aromas by which they were saluted, but although in general fastidious in such things to a degree, he was too eager on the present occasion to prosecute his inquiries to be deterred by so slight an annoyance.

The master of the shop, hearing the stoppage of the fly, and noting the distinguished appearance of the visitor, quickly left his bales upon the counter, and advanced to know with what he might have the pleasure to serve him. But before the gentleman had had time to open his mouth in answer, there was the bustle of a second arrival, and a slight female figure darting into the shop, stood just before him.

With instinctive courtesy he immediately drew back, to enable her to despatch her business first, and she was so eager about it that she did not appear to notice either the action or himself.

“ Mr Benson,” she said, anxiously, “ was there no letter or parcel for us by to-day’s post ? ”

At the sound of her voice, the stranger started and regarded her with interest. At first he had seen no more than that she was a woman ; now he perceived that she was young and a lady.

But what should a delicate creature like that have to do out on such a boisterous night ? She was so lightly clad that her thin shawl and print dress were wetted through and through, and clung around her figure, whilst the small black bonnet which she wore (hats not being in general use at that period), and the

soaking umbrella which she carried, seemed very inadequate protection for her head. Yet she evidently was thinking of nothing but the answer to her question.

"Well, Miss," replied the shopman, not over pleased at the interruption, "if I remember rightly, there *was* a summat come to-day. Wife," he shouted to some one invisible but within hearing, "be there a letter or a parcel for the Cottage?"

"Hupper drawer; left-'and corner; hoffice side," was the mysterious reply.

The stranger smiled, but the young girl only looked anxiously at Mr Benson as he examined the receptacle in question.

"Here it is, miss," he said presently, as he delivered a small packet into her outstretched hand.

"Oh! you *should* have sent it up," she replied, in a tone of annoyance; "you know of what importance it is, and how seldom he can get any sleep without it."

"Well, miss, I'm very sorry, I'm sure, you should have had the trouble like of fetching it," said the man, civilly; "but I've been out on business myself to-day, and it ain't a night, in my opinion, to send a dog out, let alone a woman, or the wife should have took it up sooner than disappoint you."

"Never mind, now!" she replied, hastily. "Good-night;" and gathering up her damp skirts and umbrella, she prepared to leave the shop again.

But as she passed into the doorway, she brushed against the stranger, which caused her to raise her eyes to his, and a pair of large, dark blue orbs, set in a wondering, innocent face, for a moment met his own.

The next, she had darted out into the rain and was gone, leaving him staring at the spot where she had disappeared.

"What may you please to want, sir?" inquired the obsequious voice of the shopman, rousing him from his brief reverie.

He was just going to say, "Who is that lady?" when he remembered himself and his errand.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I only wished to ask how far it is from here to the village of Little Bickton?"

"Little Bickton, sir?—why, this is the place," replied the shopman, in a tone of disappointment.

"Indeed! I am glad to hear it; I am much obliged to you; we have been so long on the road, that I was afraid the driver had missed his way. Do you know a family of the name of Brooke living here?"

The shopman's disappointment could not prevent his smiling at the question.

"What, Mr Brooke of the Farm Cottage, sir? You *must* be a stranger in these parts to ask that. The old gentleman's been among us for years. Why! that was Miss Nelly as just left the shop."

"Miss Nelly who?—not Miss Brooke?" demanded the stranger, eagerly.

"To be sure it was, sir, and the Cottage ain't more than three-quarter of a mile farther on. If so be you're going there, it won't take you more than ten or fifteen minutes on the road."

"Thank you! thank you!" said the gentleman quickly, as he left the shop and re-entered the coach. "Driver, go on as fast as you can to the Farm Cottage."

But the driver did not appear disposed to hurry himself.

"Oh! you've found out as I do know summat of the road, I suppose," he muttered, as he leisurely set off again. "Well, I never thought I should come, after thirty years of it, to see Benson's opinion taken over mine. Don't hurry yourself," he added, apostrophising his horse with bitter irony; "we don't know our way and maybe we might miss it."

He had not enjoyed the luxury of grumbling, however, for more than a few minutes, when he again heard the stranger's voice issuing a command to stop.

"Well, I *am* blowed," said the coachman, now thoroughly roused, as he dropped his reins and his whip, and his passenger opened the coach door for himself and stepped upon the muddy road.

A well-clipped hedge now ran along one side of the highway, whilst the open common lay on the other. Beneath the hedge, picking her way home in the dirt and the darkness, the stranger's eyes had caught sight of the youthful figure which had attracted him in the little shop. He approached her readily, thinking to introduce himself, and offer her a seat in the coach which was conveying him to the house of his grandfather and hers. He meant to have commenced by telling her his name, so as to account for his addressing her, but in his nervousness, he put what is commonly called "the cart before the horse."

"I beg your pardon," he said; "will you take a seat in the fly? My name is"—

She turned round as he spoke; he could distinguish so much even in the gloom; and then with a sudden movement, for which he was quite unprepared, silently leapt over a stile near at hand, and began to run as fast as she could through the grassy field on

the other side of the hedge. He leant over the stile, scarcely knowing what he did, peering after her into the darkness, but her form had already disappeared, and the sound of her footsteps even was lost in the yielding pasturage.

"Why, the grass must be up to her ankles," he said aloud in his surprise; "it must be like walking through a pond."

"'Tis longish by this time," remarked the coachman, who had watched the discomfiture of his fare with malicious pleasure, "for they'll be taking the second crop off it shortly; but our Kentish lasses don't think twice about a foot-wetting, I can tell you."

"*This* is a young lady," said the stranger, loftily, not liking the familiar tone in which the man had spoken of his unknown cousin.

"I don't know nothing about her," rejoined the driver, "for I didn't see her face; but whoever she is, she seems to like the wet grass, as well as her own company."

"Drive to the Farm Cottage," said the gentleman, authoritatively, as he jumped into the coach again and slammed the door. The man grinned, and drove on.

CHAPTER II.

AND IS INTRODUCED TO HIS NEW RELATIONS.

MEANWHILE Nelly Brooke was finding her way to the Farm Cottage almost as fast as himself, although the road she had chosen was the longer of the two. She had put down her umbrella again, notwithstanding the shower had not abated, and she literally ran through the wet meadows, in a style which most modern young ladies would find very difficult of imitation, jumping over the ant-hillocks and other small obstacles which occasionally came in her way. As she ran, she hardly knew why she was so energetic in her flight; the stranger's address had certainly not frightened her, for she had never been insulted in her life, and knew no cause for fear; moreover, the tone of his voice had been too courteous to provoke alarm; but she felt perhaps just a little angry that any one should have taken advantage of her being alone in the dark, to speak to her. She knew the way too well to miss it, even at that time of night, and after having traversed three meadows in an incredibly short space of time, she stopped beside a high barred gate, which communicated with the road she had left. She listened for a minute to hear if there was any sound of wheels approaching, but all was still, for

the coach had passed on some time before, and was at that moment standing at the Farm Cottage door. So, she clambered with the agility of a cat to the topmost rail, threw her light form over it, and descending thence into the public road, crossed a corner of the common, which led her directly to the latched gate which guarded her grandfather's garden. As she essayed to open it, she stumbled up against something wet and rough which stood outside the wooden palings. It was only a neighbour's donkey-foal, trying to get a little shelter beneath the laurels which overhung the garden boundaries. But the girl's sympathies were roused at once. With her soft ungloved hand, she rubbed the hardy animal's nose up and down, and drew his long wet ears through her fingers.

"Poor little Jack," she said, kindly, "couldn't they have put you in the shed on such a night as this. Come ! let me see if I cannot find a corner somewhere for you," and twisting her fingers in the rough mane, she tried to lead the creature through the garden gate. But little Jack, not being aware of her benevolent intentions in his behalf, resisted all her efforts to make him follow her, and she was compelled to leave him, and pursue her way alone. She ran lightly over the gravelled path which led to the back of the house, and lifting a familiar latch, found herself at once in the kitchen, where an old woman, in the dress of a servant, was busily employed over the fire with some culinary operation.

"Nurse Aggie," exclaimed the girl, without preface, "I want some oats, or some bread or something."

The old woman nearly upset the contents of her frying-pan into the fire, as she turned and surveyed the dripping figure which stood in the doorway.

"Now, where have you been, Miss Nelly, and on a night like this ? We've been looking for you high and low !"

"Never mind, nurse, I'll tell you presently. I want some bread."

"And what may you want bread for ?"

"For Jem Locke's little donkey ; it's such a shame ; he's left it out in all the rain, and it's not more than two months old."

"And you think I'm a going to let you run back in wet like this, and you drenched to the skin already, to feed a nasty jackass that won't as much as give you a 'thank you' when all's done. Then, you're very much mistaken, Miss Nelly ; you don't go out again to-night, not for all the jackasses in the world ;" and so saying, the old woman, having placed her pan on the hob, closed and locked the kitchen door, and put the key in her pocket.

"What a shame!" laughed the girl, carelessly, as she stood before the fire, and the steam ascended in a cloud from her damp clothes.

"Now, where *have* you been?" asked Nurse Aggie again, as she approached her and laid her hands on her dress and shawl. "God bless my soul, Miss Nelly, why, you're drenched through and through; you must take off those things directly, or you'll take your death of cold. And what has it been all for, I should like to know?"

"I went to fetch Bertie's drops," was the careless reply. "Benson had never sent them up, and he would have passed another night without them."

As she spoke, she took the small parcel from her pocket and placed it on the table.

"You went all the way to Benson's, and in weather like this, just to fetch those drops for Master Robert!" exclaimed the old nurse, lifting her hands. "Well, then I say it's a shame you should throw away your health in this fashion for such trumpery, and a shame Master Robert should let you do it. Why, you're wet to your skin, my dearie," she added, plaintively, as she placed her hand on the front of the girl's print dress.

"Come, nurse, don't cry about it," said Nelly Brooke, impatiently, "but help me to take off these things and get dry ones. Bertie didn't even know that I was going, so it's my fault if any one's; besides, after all, what's a wetting once in a way?"

"You make too much of Master Robert, Miss Nelly," grumbled the old servant, as she proceeded to disencumber her young lady of the wet clothes; "a good glass of brandy and water at night would send him off to sleep just as sure as any drops."

"No, no! nurse," replied the girl, quickly; "don't tell him that; these drops are what the doctor ordered for him."

"Tisn't a fit night for a dog to have been out," was the pertinacious rejoinder. "I warrant you didn't take Thug with you, for fear he should get his feet wet!"

"Certainly not!" laughed her young mistress; "when a monster like Thug gets wet, it is so much trouble to dry him again."

"Ay, ay," muttered the nurse, as she left the kitchen to procure a change of raiment; "he was safe and snug enough in the stable, I'll lay, like some others was in the parlour, whilst you may take your death for love of 'em; but it's always the way—it's always the way."

As she disappeared, Nelly Brooke, partially disrobed, stood

gazing earnestly into the kitchen fire. Did she believe the old woman's statement, and credit herself with less selfishness than those with whom she dwelt? Not for a moment! If her thoughts took any distinct form, it was to wonder that Nurse Aggie could say anything so disagreeable.

"She always seems so cross about Bertie now," she mused, "and to resent his helplessness as if it were an injury to herself. My poor darling! as if any trouble could be too great which has the power to make one moment of your life easier than another."

"Why this dress, nurse?" she inquired a minute later, as the old woman put a black alpaca robe, which she usually wore on Sundays, into her hands. "You could air one of my cotton frocks in no time by this fire."

"There now!" exclaimed Nurse Aggie, as she shook her head self-reproachfully, "if I haven't clean forgot to tell you that there's company in the parlour."

"Company! Who is it—Mr Weston or the vicar?"

"The vicar!" replied the old woman, disdainfully; "but there it is, Miss Nelly: your coming in in that state is just enough to drive everything out of a body's head. Why! it's your cousin from the Ingies, miss, come in a coach, and such a fine gentleman too; you must make haste and put on your frock, and go in and see him."

"My cousin! what cousin?" said Nelly Brooke, reddening under a sudden consciousness that she had already met the stranger.

"Why, Mr Nigel, the son of your uncle what's dead in Calcutty," replied the nurse.

"I never heard of him," said the girl. "Is he a tall, fair man?"

"Yes, to be sure; tall, and fair, and everything he should be, and travelled all this distance just to make your acquaintance. Come now, Miss Nelly, make haste, and go and bid him welcome."

"I shan't go in at all," replied Miss Nelly, decisively.

"Oh, that's nonsense!" said the old nurse; "why, I took tea in full five minutes ago, and there's no one to make it for them, and I've took in the cold beef, and was just frying up a few sausages as you came home. We must make him comfortable, you know, for he's just come from the Ingies, where they rolls in gold, and has everything of the best."

"I am not going in—I don't want to see him," reiterated Nelly. "Why has he come here?—who asked him?"

"Lor, Miss Nelly!" ejaculated the old servant, "I'm quite ashamed of you; why, he's your grandpa's grandson, the same as

Master Robert, and own cousin to yourself ; and what more natural, considering you've never met, than he should wish to pay you all a visit ? Blood's thicker than water, my dear. Here's the sausages quite ready, and I'm going to take them in, you come now along of me."

"No, thank you !" said Nelly Brooke, seating herself by the fire ; "I don't wish to see him or to know him."

She felt shy at the prospect of meeting the stranger again ; for visitors were so scarce in Little Bickton, that she had no doubt as to his being the same gentleman who had accosted her in the road. If he were her cousin, and knew her to be his, what must he have thought of the abrupt manner in which she had jumped over the stile and left him.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders, and carried off her sausages. Soon she returned with the message—

"Master Robert wants you, Miss Nelly."

The girl started to her feet at once, and commenced binding up her long thick hair.

"Then I must go," was all she said. She no longer questioned the necessity of her appearance in the sitting-room : she seemed to think there could be no alternative to her brother's request. As she left the kitchen, the old nurse shrugged her shoulders again, but she made no further comment.

The sitting-room, like all the rooms at the Farm Cottage, was low-roofed and old-fashioned ; it was substantially but dingily furnished, and everything it contained had been made more for use than ornament.

As Nelly Brooke entered it on that particular evening, she came into the presence of three men. The first, her grandfather, an old stern-looking man, who, sitting apart from the others at a small table of his own, leant his head abstractedly upon his hand. He always sat thus ; shading his eyes from the observation of the outer world ; never a change passing over his once handsome countenance, and scarcely a word issuing from his lips, except when he was addressed by one of his grandchildren. The second, her brother, a pale, handsome youth, born in the same hour as herself, but gifted with none of the superabundant life which flowed in her own veins ; for having been afflicted from his earliest years with a spinal weakness which rendered him incapable of any exertion, Robert Brooke lay stretched upon a low couch which had now been drawn to the tea-table. The third inmate of the sitting-room was, as Nelly had anticipated,

the same gentleman whom she had seen in the post-office, and been accosted by in the road.

Nelly Brooke, although a lady in the highest sense of the word, was young and shy, and very ignorant of the usages of society; and as she now stood blushing in the open doorway, hardly knowing whether to advance or retreat again, the stranger thought he had never seen so attractive a spectacle before.

"This is my sister Helena," said Robert Brooke, shortly. "Nelly, this is our cousin, Nigel Brooke, the son of our uncle who died last year in Calcutta."

At the sound of her brother's voice, Nelly seemed to gain courage, and advancing frankly, held out her hand to the stranger, and Nigel Brooke, as he took it, and gazed into her open countenance, was struck again, not so much by her beauty as by the quiet innocence of her expression. She was wonderfully like, and yet unlike, her afflicted brother. Robert was his sister struck down and withered by sickness: Helena was her brother, glowing with health and strength; but the likeness extended only to their features, for whilst the girl's expression was one of cheerful content, the young man's face bore signs of a fretful and self-absorbed existence.

"We have met before, I think," said Nigel Brooke, as he held the dimpled hand for a minute in his own.

"Yes," said Nelly, blushing, "but I could not tell that it was you."

"Why, when did that happen?" inquired Robert Brooke.

"Just now at the post-office," replied his sister. "I only ran down for your drops, Bertie."

"And I had stepped in to inquire if I was in the right way," interposed Nigel Brooke; "but I am afraid you must have got very wet," he added, addressing himself to Nelly.

"A little," she answered, shyly.

"Poor Nell!" said her brother, fondly, placing his hand upon her head as she sat down beside him. "What a dear good child you are to be always thinking of me. What should I do without you?"

She stooped and kissed him on the forehead as he spoke, and took his wasted hand in hers and held it lovingly. It was a beautiful sight—so thought Nigel Brooke—to see these two, whom God had mysteriously endowed with one life, but with such different capabilities for its enjoyment, wrapt up in each other. Yet he could not help remarking even then that Robert Brooke did not raise the least objection to his sister inconveniencing herself on his account, or express any anxiety as to whether

she might suffer from the exposure. As to the grandfather, he did not appear to have heard the subject of their discourse, or even to have noticed his granddaughter's entrance into the room.

"Come now, Nelly," said young Brooke, after a pause, "pour us out some tea, there's a dear girl, and let our cousin go on with what he was talking about when you came in and interrupted him."

"I was only telling your brother," said Nigel Brooke, as she took her place at the tea-table, "that my mother and I have taken a furnished house at a place called Orpington for three years, which is, I am afraid, the extent of the holiday I must allow myself."

When she looked at him inquiringly, he continued—

"Perhaps you have heard that my father, your uncle, was a merchant at Calcutta, and on his death I was made a partner in the house. There are two principals in the business, and as we only consider it necessary for one of us to be in Calcutta at a time, we have agreed to take alternate leave to England. I shall remain at home for the next three years, and then I shall return to Bengal, and my partner will take his holiday. You understand me?"

"Yes," she answered, quietly.

"Neither my father nor mother have been to England for many years past, for—for several reasons," he continued, lowering his voice, as if not wishing his grandfather to hear him; "but I persuaded my mother to accompany me now, for I am her only child, as perhaps you know. Have you ever heard of your Aunt Eliza?"

Nelly looked at her brother for an answer. "Have I?" she asked, and he replied—

"I don't know, but I think not."

"Never mind!" rejoined Nigel Brooke, "it is of little consequence, but that is my mother's name, and I should much like you both to know her. You have no aunt but herself, no cousin but me; so we should be friends, should we not?"

"We *will* be," replied Robert, confidently, but Nelly said nothing.

"When I arrived in England a month ago," resumed their cousin, my first thought was to pay you a visit, but there has been so little communication between our families of late years," lowering his voice again, "that I had some difficulty in finding your address, and still more in getting an answer to my letter to my grandfather."

"Did you write to him?" inquired the brother.

"To be sure I did, and asked his permission to visit him here. I should not have ventured to do so without."

"He never told us," said Robert Brooke.

"He never tells us anything," said his sister.

"We might as well be dead, as buried here alive with him," exclaimed the boy, emphatically.

Nelly looked at him reproachfully for a minute, and then rising, took up her station again by his sofa, and placed her hand caressingly on his. He returned the caress, but repeated his words.

"It is true, Nelly! We might just as well be dead or better. We hear nothing, and see nothing, and know nothing; this place is a living grave."

"Hush, darling," she said, tenderly.

Her brother was silenced, but he did not look convinced, and Nigel Brooke, watching them as they hung about each other, thought again, as he had thought before, that he had never seen so beautiful a picture.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE COUSINS DISCUSS CERTAIN FAMILY MATTERS.

MEANWHILE the old man remained in the same position that he had maintained from the commencement of the evening, moving his head for a moment, perhaps, to drink the tea with which his granddaughter had provided him, but quickly resting it on his hand again with the appearance of becoming perfectly unconscious of all that was passing around him. He was not so entirely self-absorbed, however, as he professed to be, for as soon as the meal was finished and the table had been cleared by old Aggie, he rose of his own accord, and bidding the young men an abrupt "good night," left the room; and as his cousin Nelly had disappeared some short time previously, Nigel Brooke concluded that he should see neither of them again that evening. As soon as his grandfather's back was turned, Robert Brooke desired the old servant to set hot water and spirits before them, and turning to his cousin, demanded if he smoked.

"I do in general," was the reply, "but I can dispense with it for one evening."

"But where's the necessity?" said Robert; "we'll smoke together."

"Are you permitted to smoke?" exclaimed Nigel, in astonishment, alluding to the delicacy of his cousin's health, rather than his age.

"I don't know about being 'permitted,'" replied Robert, scornfully, "but I know that no prohibition would deter me; why, I could not *live* without it; there's nothing else to do in this hole."

"Perhaps, if you didn't smoke so much, Master Robert," interposed the old nurse, as she lingered for a moment beside his sofa, "you'd be better able to do something."

"You go to your kitchen, Aggie, and learn to speak when you're spoken to," exclaimed the youth, half in earnest and half in play. "That old woman brought both me and Nelly up from our births, Nigel," he continued, as they found themselves alone again, "and doesn't know the meaning of taking a liberty."

"And I shouldn't try to teach it her, Robert," was his cousin's reply; "so faithful a servant should be regarded in the light of a friend. But I want to ask you if my grandfather always maintains the silent mood we have seen him in to night, or has he assumed it for my benefit? It is a cold welcome, although I have no right to expect any other."

"I assure you it is not on your account," replied Robert Brooke, "for I never remember him to have been otherwise. Aggie says he was not like that when my grandmother was alive; but she died when I and my sister were still in our swaddling clothes."

"I remember it well," said Nigel Brooke, thoughtfully.

"Ever since I have known him," continued Robert, "he has been the same silent, gloomy nature; and of late years he has become very deaf, which increases his reserve. He sits as you have seen him whenever he is at home; sometimes he will hold a book in his hand; oftener, however, he appears to be simply buried in thought."

"And how does he employ himself in the daytime?"

"He takes long walks, sometimes for miles, in search of fossils and stones; the only thing he cares for is geology, and the only books he ever reads are such as treat of it."

"It must be very dull for your sister and yourself."

"Dull? Dull is no word for it! It is much more endurable for Nelly than for me, as you may suppose. She has health and her household occupations; whilst I lie on this sofa half the day, and crawl about the garden the other half—my existence is scarcely bearable."

"But surely my grandfather takes some interest in the property. I thought there was a small farm attached to the cottage."

"There used to be, but he has long given it over to some

people of the name of Weston, who own the large farm to which the house belongs. No! he takes no interest in anything—everything is left to old Aggie and Nelly. I suppose he gives the former money occasionally, but I never see him do it. If Nelly and I had any use for money in this barren place, I expect we should find it hard enough to get it out of him. I think he has treated us very badly. We have been sheltered and clothed and fed by him, it is true, but he could scarcely have done less. We have received scarcely any education, and been allowed to make no friends, and I want to know the reason of it. I want to know what right he has to keep us from infancy to maturity in this out-of-the-way place, without an advantage in life. I should like to call him to account for it.”

The youth's eye kindled, and his pale cheek flushed as he uttered the words, and he looked even more like his sister than he had done before.

“Hush!” said his cousin, cautiously, for Robert had raised his voice, “perhaps there are more excuses for it than you are aware of. In the first place, your grandfather is very poor.”

“Did my father leave no money behind him then?”

“He did not—that I am aware of,” said Nigel Brooke, but he uttered the words with so much constraint, that his listener looked at him with surprise.

“Yet *your* father was rich?” he said, inquiringly.

“Not when he went to Calcutta. He made almost all his money there.”

“And *my* father was the younger son?” observed Robert.

“You are aware, I suppose, that our grandfather was a clergyman,” said Nigel, evading an answer, “and that, when he resigned his profession, he had little or nothing to live on.”

“What made him resign it then?”

“I am no more in his secrets than you are,” replied the elder cousin, with an evident desire to relinquish the subject; “you forget that to-night is the first time I have seen him since I was a child myself.”

“Ah! *secrets*, that is the word,” exclaimed Robert, eagerly, “my grandfather *has* a secret, Nigel, which I would give worlds to discover. We have often tried to make him tell us all about our parents, but he is as taciturn on that subject as he is in all others. The only thing we do know is, that we are orphans, and that our mother died when we were born. But if a man's life has been innocent, why should he bury himself from all his own family, and

refuse even to speak of them? Why! will you believe me, when I tell you, that until you walked into the cottage this evening, neither I nor Nelly knew that you so much as existed? We heard last year that our uncle in Calcutta was dead, because my grandfather thought fit to invest himself and me with hat-bands on the occasion, and Nelly with a black frock; otherwise, I daresay, he would not have mentioned it. There's something beneath all this, Nigel, you may depend upon it."

"Perhaps so," replied his cousin, "but it is not crime, Robert, be assured of that; whatever you choose to surmise, don't think that your grandfather has led any but a blameless life. Mistaken it may have been, and hard and unforgiving I know it to have been; but he has done nothing which need prevent him holding up his head before all the world. As for your not hearing of myself, it is easily accounted for. My father married early and settled in England, but a bitter quarrel arising between him and his father, when I was a lad at school, caused him to leave this country for Bengal, which he never again quitted. I was his only child, and therefore he took me with him, and I worked under him until I succeeded him in the business. At different times I have visited the Cape, Australia, and even Paris, but I have never set foot in my native country since I left it, until a month ago. Therefore, you see, it was impossible we could have met, and unlikely that, under the circumstances, our grandfather should care to revive unpleasant recollections by mentioning my name to you. But I am old enough to remember the circumstance of your birth, and my father's quarrel with my grandfather, and I have always resolved that when we had an opportunity of meeting, it should not be my fault if we were not friends."

And Nigel Brooke smiled kindly on his young cousin as he spoke.

"You remember our birth!" exclaimed Robert; "why, what age are you?"

"I am thirty-five."

"Indeed! you don't look like it!"

"Do I not—yet my hair is turning gray—and you?"

"I am just eighteen."

"Ah! of course, so you must be," and for a few minutes the cousins smoked in silence.

"If you can remember our birth," resumed Robert Brooke, "you must remember our father. What was he like?"

"I do not remember him," replied the other, with the same constraint he had exhibited before.

"How is that?"

"I was a boy at school, and seldom at home."

"And he and your father were not good friends, I suppose?" continued Robert, inquiringly.

"They were not, Robert, I regret to say," replied Nigel Brooke, uneasily; "but this questioning is becoming very painful to me; pray discontinue it."

"But at least you can tell me what my father died of?"

"For Heaven's sake, let us dismiss the subject," exclaimed Nigel Brooke, with strange emphasis, as he rose from his seat and helped himself to some of the spirits before him; "we have had quite enough of it for one evening; besides, I am keeping you up, Robert. Do you know that it is past midnight; rather a late hour for an invalid, is it not?"

"I don't consider myself an invalid," said the other, pettishly; "however, if you are ready for bed, you have but to ring for Aggie to show you to your room. I sit up till all hours myself, so it makes no difference to me."

"I should think it must make a difference in your health; do you experience much pain?"

"No! not unless I have been standing or sitting up for too long, and then my back is used to ache. I sometimes think if I were away from this cursed hole that I should be as strong as other men; but the want of medical advice is another of the benefits that I have to thank my grandfather for."

"I thought your weakness had been chronic," said his cousin,—
"that you had been born so."

"So they *say*," replied Robert Brooke, roughly, "but I don't believe it any the more for that. However, if you are really ready, we will make a move."

"I *am* tired," admitted his cousin, "for I found the journey here rather a fatiguing one. Shall I ring the bell for you?"

Knowing that the boy could not well walk without assistance, he had expected that the old nurse would appear to conduct him to his room; but what was his surprise, on the door opening, to see his cousin Nelly on the threshold. She came in with cheerful readiness, but she looked pale, and dark rings about her eyes showed that she had waited for the summons longer than she should have done.

"Ready, Bertie?" she asked, with a smile.

"Our cousin is, Nelly, so it's all the same thing. I suppose his room is prepared for him. Tell Aggie to bring us the candlesticks, and go before to show the way."

She flew to execute his bidding, and returned bearing the lighted candles herself.

"I am so sorry to give you this trouble," said Nigel Brooke, as he took the one she tendered him. "I had no idea we were keeping you up, or I should have suggested to Robert that it was time to go to bed before."

"Oh! it is of no consequence," she answered, blushing; "I always sit up for Bertie, however late he may be. Do I not?" she continued, addressing her brother as she placed one hand beneath his shoulders, and raised him into a sitting posture.

"Of course you do," he replied; "I couldn't get on without this sister of mine, Nigel! No one can do for me what she can."

He was standing now, and the curvature in the spine was very apparent, as he stooped forward, supported by her strong young arms. Yet it was evident that the burthen was too heavy for her, for the colour in her face came and went painfully.

"You are happy in the possession of so tender a nurse, Robert," said Nigel Brooke, as he bid the cousins good night. But the word seemed to grate upon the cripple's ears.

"You don't call yourself a 'nurse' yet, Nelly, do you?" he said, appealing to his sister.

"Oh no," she answered, quickly, "only your sister, Bertie."

"She is more than that, Nigel," said Robert, laughing; "she is *myself*—without her I should not be."

At this tribute Nelly bent her eyes downwards, but not before her cousin had seen that they sparkled with pleasure at the praise.

He stayed in the sitting-room from a feeling of delicacy until the difficult business of getting the invalid up-stairs was accomplished, and then the old nurse appeared, and offered to conduct him to his sleeping apartment. He followed her silently, thinking how strange it was that after all that had happened, he should be going to rest beneath the roof of his grandfather.

"Is there anything more, sir?" asked the woman, respectfully, when she had deposited the candlestick upon the table.

"Nothing, thank you," he exclaimed, starting from the train of thought into which he had fallen.

A little while later he opened his door, for the night was close, notwithstanding the storm, and the cottage ceilings were low. He did so softly, for fear of disturbing his cousins or grandfather,

and he paused a few minutes before he closed it again. On the opposite side of the landing a bright light streamed beneath the door of the room which he knew to be occupied by Robert Brooke, and the sweet tones of his cousin Nelly, as she read to her brother from the Bible, issued thence in a continued murmur.

The sound seemed to chain him, and he stood there listening, until a fretful voice interrupted the reader with the words—

“There now, Nelly, that will do for to-night. Let me go to sleep, there’s a good girl;” and the next moment the reading ceased, and the light was extinguished.

Nigel Brooke could picture to himself the affectionate caress which followed, and had just time to creep back into his own room, as Nelly issued from that of her brother.

He threw himself on the bed, but it was long before he could compose his thoughts sufficiently to allow him to sleep. He could not help wondering what it must feel like to be loved and cared for, as Robert Brooke was loved and cared for by his sister; the sensation was one which he had never known, for both his parents had been people of a most prosaic turn of mind, who thought time wasted which was passed in fondling, and words wasted which were only words of endearment. And from his earliest years Nigel Brooke had been taught that the true object of life was to make a position for himself by means of his wealth.

So the idea was a new one to him, and he could not help questioning whether, had he been reared in an atmosphere of love, he should have been a different man to what he was.

And he had not solved the difficulty when he fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

NIGEL BROOKE FALLS IN LOVE WITH A COUNTRY LIFE.

WHEN he waked the next morning, all traces of the storm had disappeared, and the August sun was streaming with so much force upon his face through the thin blind which shaded the window, that it reminded him of India, and caused him to exclaim, “By Jove,” before he was fully awake, as it flashed across his dawning intellect that he must have overslept himself. But as soon as he had leapt out of bed and thrown open the little lattice, he guessed that he must be mistaken, and the hands of his watch, which stood at half-past six, corroborated the suspicion.

The constant crowing of the cock, answered by a quiet chuckle from his hens ; the hissing of geese and quacking of ducks ; in fact, all the babble of the farm-yard, which seemed to arise from just beneath his window, proved it was still early morning.

His room, which was at the back of the cottage, looked out upon a kitchen garden, apparently well stocked with all the more common fruits and vegetables, to one side of which lay a meadow, and to the other a shady and most inviting nut-walk, which appeared to run right round the little inclosure, and at the sight of which Nigel Brooke proceeded to make a rapid toilet, in order that he might the sooner inspect the quiet English beauties which had so much charm for him after his lengthened residence in Bengal.

As soon as he was dressed, he left his bedroom cautiously, and took his way down-stairs, not expecting to find any of the inmates of the cottage stirring at that hour, unless it was the old woman whom they called Nurse Aggie ; and until he saw the hall door standing wide open to admit the sweet fresh air into the lower rooms, he had hardly expected even to meet her. Passing through, he found himself in the front garden, if it could be called by that name. A large oval piece of grass, which had once been a lawn, surrounded by a gravelled walk, and bordered by tall straggling laurel bushes, was all that met his eye. The grass was thick and rank from want of attention ; the laurels here and there entwined in the embraces of a huge hollyhock almost lay on the ground, from the violence of the late storm, whilst a few of the most ordinary seedlings, such as stocks, mignonette, and balsam, which he guessed had been put in by the women's hands to redeem the place from a look of utter desolation, had shed half their blossoms on the soil they could scarcely be said to adorn.

Nothing that Nigel Brooke had yet seen or heard of the internal economy of the Farm Cottage, had struck him so forcibly as the appearance of this untidy and neglected garden.

"It is like the old man's life," he said to himself ; "aimless, sapless, and forlorn ; and that from the fault of others rather than himself. Well ! I wish I could do something to make up for it to him ; if he will let me make the attempt, it shall not be my fault if I fail."

He turned from the scene, which, under the circumstances, was really melancholy, notwithstanding the sunshine with which it was enveloped, and judging that the path by the side of the house would lead him to the nut-walk he had seen from his bedroom, bent his steps in that direction. He had not gone far be-

fore he found he would have to pass the kitchen door and window, but he thought nothing of that until he came opposite the latter, which was thrown open, and saw leaning with her bare dimpled arms upon the sill his cousin Nelly.

Nigel Brooke started back, coloured, as if he had been detected in a crime, and then commenced to stammer some apologies for what he termed his trespassing.

The girl coloured also, but simply at his unexpected presence ; she would never have dreamt of blushing for the situation, which was an everyday occurrence to her.

"You are quite welcome, cousin," she said, wishing, with intuitive politeness, to set him at his ease ; "won't you come in?"

The genuine request did all that it was intended to do. Nigel Brooke refused the offer, but seated himself on the window-sill instead.

"No, thank you, the morning is too lovely to spend in-doors ; besides, I might disturb you."

"You would not do that," she artlessly replied ; "but you might get a dust of flour on your coat, because I am just going to make the pastry."

And as she spoke, she took up her position beside a small deal table, which was placed in front of the window, and laden with the articles necessary to her occupation.

"Can you really make it?" asked Nigel Brooke with surprise, for the ladies he had been used to associate with had never been able to do anything which was of use.

Nelly's big eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"*Really!* why, no one ever touches it in this house but myself. I make all the tarts, and puddings, and pies, and all the bread into the bargain. Aggie used to do that, but Bertie thinks I have a lighter hand now, and I ought to have, you know, because I'm so much the younger. Do you like milk rolls?"

"I think I should like anything which you made," replied her cousin, looking at her with genuine admiration.

If he had considered her charming on the previous evening, when her shyness had made her awkward, and her fatigue had made her pale, what must he have thought of her as she appeared, refreshed by a good night's rest, and the restraint in her manners replaced by an innocent confidence. Strictly speaking, perhaps, Nelly Brooke was not beautiful ; her twin brother, who possessed the same features, sharpened and refined by sickness, might have laid a stronger claim to the title, but she was better

calculated to attract a man (particularly such a one as Nigel Brooke, who, having seen no English complexions for so many years, was ready to fall down and worship "colour") than some of the most perfect faces that ever gladdened this earth. She was tall, a good deal taller than her brother when they stood together,—and her figure, without being large, was full. She had two dark-blue eyes, set wide apart in a broad low forehead, which would have been as white as her arms, had it not been sun-burnt; a straight short nose; and an open mouth which displayed a set of firm white teeth. Her hair, which in country fashion had been cut short across her forehead, where, from a natural tendency to curl, it hung like little tendrils on a vine, was simply tied with a broad black ribbon behind. In hue it was neither fair nor dark, but of a nut-brown, which exposure had turned rust-colour; and her eyebrows and lashes were well marked, and considerably darker than her hair. She was a woman who might have been pronounced either pretty or commonplace, according as her judges liked or disliked her; but as much may be said for every phase of beauty. Nigel Brooke had already passed his decision in the case, and did not dream of questioning it. He thought her simply charming.

As she commenced to dabble in the flour and milk, and butter, apparently perfectly unconscious that her print dress, and her homely occupation rendered her in the least different from other young ladies, he asked her if she were less afraid of him that morning than she had been on the previous night.

"I was not afraid of you last night," she said, blushing; "I am never afraid of anything."

"But you ran away very fast when I spoke to you."

"Because you took me by surprise; I was sorry for it afterwards; I thought you might have wished to ask your way somewhere, but it was too late then. Besides, I hadn't Thug with me."

"And who is Thug?"

"I will show you," and shaking the flour off her fingers, she ran to the open door, and called the name in a strong clear voice. A rustle was heard coming up the nut-walk, followed by a crash through the privet hedge, and then a large mastiff, of the true English breed, rushed out, and without taking any notice of the stranger, beyond a low growl, leapt up at the girl's figure, and laid his huge paws on her shoulders.

"Oh, he is so heavy!" she said as she bent beneath the weight; "but he does love his mistress so."

The fierce animal's hanging jaw was thrust against her face, and his tusks were close to her white throat. Nigel Brooke actually shuddered as he looked at them and turned his eyes away.

"So that is Thug," he said, "he is a splendid fellow; but you shouldn't let him put his teeth so close to you as that. A mastiff's temper is very uncertain."

"You don't think Thug would hurt *me*, cousin, do you?" she said, amused at the mere idea; "why, I brought him up from a little thing of *that* size," clasping her rosy palms together. "Mr Weston gave him to me when he was only six days old, because the mother had more puppies than she could rear; and how do you think I fed him?" she continued, laughing girlishly—"with a bottle; like a baby! He's a nice baby, isn't he? Go down, Thug, I can't touch you; don't you see that I'm making the pastry?" and shaking the huge animal off her, she proceeded with her business.

"So now I suppose he rewards your care of him by looking after you," remarked Nigel Brooke; "but what I have told you is really true. The nature of mastiffs is treacherous, and I have heard of more than one case in which they have unexpectedly turned upon their own masters and killed them. So, do be careful. I must allow, however, that your 'baby' does you credit; I never saw a more splendid specimen. I should like to have had him out shooting with me in India. Those fangs of his would look more appropriate in my mind at the throat of a wild beast, than at that of a young lady."

"I couldn't distrust Thug," replied Nelly, confidently; "he would hurt himself sooner than me; but have you ever shot a tiger, cousin?"

"Several."

"Not really?" and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Really and truly. I will send you the skin of one, if you would like to have it."

"Oh, should I not? Fancy, Thug, the skin of a real tiger, such as I used to pretend you were. And how did you shoot them—do tell me all about it?"

The making of the pastry threatened to come to a stand-still, as she turned her glowing, expectant face upon him.

"I will tell you all about it another time, Nelly," said her cousin, quite refreshed by this unexpected burst of enthusiasm; "but it is too long a story to begin before breakfast. I hope, however, that I shall have more than one opportunity in which

to tell it you. I want particularly to have a little private conversation with my grandfather this morning ; do you think you can manage it for me ?”

“Oh yes ! I will tell him so, and you and he can go into the front room and talk there. It is of no use hinting a thing to grandpapa ; you must tell him downright, or he doesn’t understand you.”

The old servant had entered the kitchen by this time, and was moving about it preparing the breakfast.

“Nurse Aggie, has Bertie’s bell rung yet ?” demanded her young mistress.

“No, Miss Nelly, and I can answer it when it do. Don’t you disturb yourself.”

“How is your brother this morning ? Have you seen him yet ?” asked Nigel Brooke.

“Yes ; I took him some tea an hour ago.”

“She slaves herself to death for him, sir,” interposed the old woman.

“Hold your tongue, nurse,” said Nelly, playfully. “Bertie is always at his best on first rising—it is the long day without occupation which fatigues him so.”

“Ah ! if he did something, mayhap he’d feel better,” again put in old Aggie.

“Aggie ! how *can* you speak so ? you ought to be ashamed of yourself ; and before a stranger too. Nothing any one could do for Bertie could be too much, cousin Nigel,” she said, turning towards him, “he is so helpless, and his life is such a burthen to him. Oh !” she continued, with an impatient gesture, “sometimes when I see him beside me, and feel what it is to be able to run about and endure fatigue, I *hate* myself for being so strong and so well—why should it have been me and not him ?” and the blue eyes actually filled with tears.

“’Tis lucky for you, Miss Nelly,” remarked Aggie, “that you can’t change places with him at your will, or it’s precious little waiting on that you’d get, I fancy.”

“Aggie ! I won’t listen to you any more,” said the girl in a voice of offence, as she wiped her hands and prepared to leave the kitchen, “and you may finish the pastry by yourself ! Come, Cousin Nigel, we will go down the nut-walk, and I will show you the fowls and the ducks ; they don’t belong to us, I am sorry to say, because grandpapa has given up the meadows to Mr Weston again, but I take almost as much pleasure in them as if they did.”

She pulled down her sleeves, and, followed by Thug, emerged into the open air without any covering to her head.

"Will not the sun be too strong for you?" suggested her cousin.

She laughed merrily

"Oh no! I never wear anything on my head except on Sundays, or if it rains. If we were to begin to wear bonnets all the year round in Little Bickton, we should be obliged to go to Reddington for them, and then what would poor Benson say?"

She led him through paths almost rendered impassable by the currant and gooseberry bushes which encroached upon them.

"Isn't it a pity," she said, "that grandpapa won't even pay a man to prune these bushes; the fruit crops are getting less every year in consequence. Aggie and I are obliged to cut them sometimes, else we should not be able to get down to the vegetables; but our cutting does more harm than good. Do you know how to prune?"

He was obliged to acknowledge that he did not.

"That's a pity, or I should have asked you to show me how. Mrs Weston said her man should teach me whenever I could go there; but Bertie can so seldom spare me—but I really must not let them go beyond this season."

"Who attends to the vegetables then?" asked Nigel Brooke.

"We do—that is, Aggie and I. Oh! I can do everything of that kind—my potatoes never fail, nor do any of the other things, except the celery, and I can't manage the celery, it always turns brown at the heart. Here it is, you see; what is it, cousin? Have I banked it up too high, or not enough?"

"I really can't tell you, Nelly. I am afraid I am not sufficiently clever to give you any advice."

"Ah! perhaps you haven't celery in India. I shall look at the vicar's next time I fetch the papers. By the by, to-day is Saturday, is it not?"

"It is."

"Then I shall go this afternoon, and get him to tell me all about it."

"Who is your vicar? and where does he live?"

"Three miles from Bickton, but he often comes over here, and we always have one service on Sunday, unless it's very wet. His name is Mr Ray, and he is so good-natured. He used to teach Bertie and me when we were little children. Every week he lets Bertie have his newspapers to read, and on Saturdays I go and fetch them for him."

"And how do you go?"

"On Mr Weston's little pony. He lends it me. The people about here are all so kind. Cousin Nigel, I've got my garden knife with me, would you mind if I cut the vegetables for dinner before we go to see the fowls?"

"Not at all—why should I?"

"Because you must help me to carry them in. Let me see, we have Irish stew to-day, so we shall want onions and cabbages. We will cut the cabbages first; you can hold them as I hand them to you."

Stooping down, she immediately set to work, and severing three enormous heads of cabbage, their leaves all glistening with the rain of the previous evening, piled them one after another in her cousin's arms.

"I don't think I can hold any more, Nelly!" he observed, as the topmost vegetable touched his nose and wetted it.

"Well, that must do then," she said, "but cabbages go no way at this time of the year; they are almost all outside, you see."

At this moment there sounded the tinkle of a bell.

"Oh; there's Bertie's bell," exclaimed Nelly, as she threw down her gardening knife and wiped her wet hands on her apron. "I *must* go. *Please*, Cousin Nigel, just carry them into the kitchen for me, and give them to Aggie."

She preferred the request so imploringly, that he would have had no heart to remonstrate, even had she given him the opportunity; but, as she spoke, she darted up the garden path again, closely followed by the mastiff, and Nigel Brooke, almost hidden behind his burthen, carried the cabbages as she had entreated him into the kitchen.

He only thought, as he deposited them on the table, what would some of his grand Calcutta acquaintances have said if they could have seen him then!

And yet, he felt very much in love with a country life and its surroundings, even as he placed them there.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW.

THE morning meal passed much the same as the evening one had done, for both brother and sister lost their communicative powers

beneath the spell of silence which the presence of their grandfather seemed to cast upon them, and their cousin felt as little inclined to talk before him as they did.

As soon as it was over, however, a glance of intelligence between Nigel Brooke and Nelly caused the latter to follow the old man into the passage, where he had just taken down his hat and stick, preparatory to going out, and prevent his design with the words :

"You mustn't go out just yet, grandpapa, because our cousin wishes to speak to you first."

"What can your cousin have to say to me?" demanded her grandfather, turning his lack lustre eyes upon her.

"I don't know, grandpapa, but you must go into the study, until he comes to you;" and as she spoke, the girl, who appeared to be the ruling power in the house, although at times so sorely taxed, took off the old man's hat again, replaced his stick in the stand, and led him towards the door of the room she had indicated.

There was nothing so modern as a drawing-room at the Farm Cottage; the dining-room and the study were the only sitting-rooms it possessed, and the latter was so seldom used that it might have been dispensed with altogether.

The next minute Nelly danced back into the dining-room with the intelligence.

"I've caught grandpapa for you, cousin Nigel, and put him in the trap, so you had better go to him quickly before he escapes again."

He took her advice, but as he laid his hand on the study door, he felt anything but easy at the prospect of the coming interview; and when he entered the room, and found that the old man had placed himself motionless and corpse-like as usual in an easy chair, from which he did not even raise his eyes at the sound of his grandson's footsteps, his doubts enlarged to certainties.

Nothing daunted, however, at all events outwardly, Nigel Brooke drew a seat in front of his grandfather, so that he could not fail to see and hear him.

"I have asked for this interview, sir," he commenced, "in order to speak to you of the letter which I had the honour to address to you here."

"I answered that letter," was the curt reply.

"You did; but in so cold and indifferent a manner, that it was a hard thing for me to make up my mind to accept the permission which it so ungraciously extended to visit you here. In my letter,

however, I told you that my dying father's message to yourself was an entreaty that you would let 'bygones be bygones,' and not transmit to his son the indifference which you had for so many years shown to himself."

"And from whose fault was that?" demanded the old man, suddenly roused into something like life.

"I am not here, sir, to discuss my dead father's failings. If in the circumstance to which you allude he erred, it was on the side of what he considered his duty, and he bitterly repented the consequence of his rashness. The present question is, whether you will now do as he wished, and permit me to try and rub out old scores, by making up to you for what you lost in him."

"What do you mean?" said his grandfather; "I do not follow you."

"I mean, sir, that I am rich, much richer than I have any need to be, and that I cannot enjoy the luxury with which my poor father has left me surrounded, whilst his nearest relatives and mine are living in obscurity. I mean that if you and my cousins will share my prosperity, you will confer an obligation on me instead of incurring one yourself, and that I believe your son will rest quieter in his grave for the knowledge that you and I are living together in amity."

The old man appeared almost touched, but he quickly repulsed the feeling.

"It is impossible!" he said, shortly. "I will neither receive money from you, nor allow those children to do so. Had it not been for your father, they might have been surrounded by as many luxuries this day as yourself."

"But putting all questions of pecuniary matters on one side, sir, surely you will not refuse to visit us at Orpington. We have a house large enough to contain us all, where you shall enjoy as much quiet and seclusion as you please, and where nothing could give me greater pleasure than to see you and my cousins for an indefinite period."

"I will not enter your house, Nigel Brooke," said the old man, emphatically; "were I to sit smiling at your board, and pledge you in your wine, the blood of three would rise up and forbid it. You have not forgotten, perhaps, that the blow of your father's conduct caused his mother's death. He said let 'bygones be bygones.' It is because they *are* bygones, and can never be remedied, that I *cannot* forget them, and I *cannot* forgive them."

And, rising from his seat, the old man paced up and down the

room, looking more excited than any of his friends had seen him for years.

"I am very sorry to hear you speak like this, sir," said his grandson. "I had hoped that eighteen years would have softened, if not changed, the feelings with which you regarded this unfortunate business."

"Eighteen years ! young man !" exclaimed the grandfather, with shrill anger. "Can eighteen years give me back those whom I have lost ? Can eighteen years restore to those children their parents, or replace me in the sacred profession which I followed ? Do you come now with the offer of your gold and your silver, and think to pay me for what I have suffered, and seen others suffer, for your father's error ? Bah ! sir, you must be young indeed to think it ! I will *not* eat at your board, nor enrich myself at your expense, lest the world say I took compensation at the last for what I vowed never to forgive. Let me hear no more of it ! —no more of it !" and he turned towards the door, as though he would close the interview by leaving the apartment. But Nigel Brooke was there before him.

"Hear me for one moment, sir !" he said. "If I am nothing else to you, at least I am your son's son, and entirely guiltless myself in this matter. In justice, listen to me one moment longer."

The old man suffered himself to be led back to the chair he had quitted, though he would not re-seat himself, but remained standing by the side.

"I came to England, grandfather," said Nigel Brooke, using the name for the first time, "with but one wish, and that was, to find out my cousins, and try to make them (if not yourself) some compensation for the injury which my father inflicted on them. I was not aware of the extent or nature of that injury until he lay on his own deathbed, and told me the story. I wrote to you—I came down to this place—filled with the same desire—the same idea—to make restitution. For yourself, you refuse my aid, even my acquaintance it seems to me, but surely you will not do so on behalf of my cousins. Putting aside all other considerations, they are my closest, and on my father's side, my only relations. I wish to be their friend, to see them grow to love me and trust in me ; that some day, when they hear the truth concerning themselves they may acknowledge that whatever they lost by the deed of the father, the son would have repaid them could he have done so ; even to the shedding of his blood."

He paused, overcome by the force of his own enthusiasm,

and his grandfather even appeared arrested, if not touched, by his argument.

"If you will not come yourself," he continued, "let my cousins come to me; my mother will give them a welcome, if only for my sake—and she authorised me to make this request to you. You must be an old man now, grandfather, for I am thirty-five, and my father was turned sixty when he died; you cannot live many years longer; and who is to befriend Robert and Helena when you are gone, if you separate them from my mother and myself. The boy's life is likely to be a brief one, and how is a girl to fight the world alone? I will not again ask you to outrage your own feelings by accepting my hospitality; but let me have my cousins on a visit to Orpington, and they shall tell you themselves what kind of reception they receive there!"

The old man was silent for a moment; and then he replied, slowly but firmly.

"You are right; the children may want a friend. So far then I will trust you; if it is their own wish to go to Orpington, they shall go."

Nigel Brooke seized his grandfather's unwilling hand.

"I cannot tell you, sir, how much I thank you for this permission; and as for trusting me, I swear to you this moment, that as long as I live, neither Robert nor his sister shall ever want a friend."

His grandfather looked at him in surprise.

"You seem in earnest, young man: but I have heard your father say as much on behalf of his own flesh and blood: and how did he keep his vow?"

"He thought he was keeping it, sir."

"Pshaw! let us have no more of this. If it is the wish of Robert and Helena to visit you and your mother at your fine place at Orpington, they may do so. And I have no more to say on the matter."

With which, old Mr Brooke turned abruptly on his heel, walked into the passage, regained his hat and stick, and left the house without another word; whilst Nigel, thankful beyond measure that the conference was over, returned to the dining-room.

"You are alone?" he said, as he found Bertie lying on his couch with his eyes half-closed and a pipe between his teeth.

"Yes; the women are always busy at this time of the day, shaking beds, and making puddings. What a life to lead, to be sure."

His cousin thought that Robert's life for one must be less endurable, but he made no comment on the remark.

"I have been talking to our grandfather," he said, "and have gained his consent that you and your sister shall pay us a visit at Orpington, if you feel so inclined."

"At your place?" said Robert, with aroused interest.

"Yes, and I am sure you would enjoy it. Orpington is not two miles from Hilstone in Somerset—it is a pretty place; but I chose it on account of its proximity to the meet, which takes place close by three times a week. I am exceedingly fond of hunting,—indeed, of all out of door sports; but we shall have plenty of amusement in-doors. My mother, I know, will do all she can to make you and Nelly comfortable and happy, and it will be a change for you, after Little Bickton. Do say that you'll come, Robert?"

"My sister shall," he said.

"And not yourself?"

Robert Brooke shook his head.

"Why not? You shall be as quiet as possible if you prefer it; and I am afraid your sister will not come without you!"

"Yes, she will; but I can't go, Nigel, thank you. You see I've been cooped up here in solitary confinement all my life, accustomed to one set of things and people, and I couldn't bestir myself now after so many years, to go amongst a lot of company, and have to sit up and behave myself, and take a part in the conversation; I should be miserable—the mere idea frightens me."

"But you shall do just as you like, Robert," said his cousin.

"I will get you a wheeled chair, with which to go about the house, and I have a first-rate man, whom I have had for years, who will attend to you as if you were a baby, and"—

"Thank you!" said the boy, looking rather affronted, "but I don't think I quite require the attention of a baby."

His cousin saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to remedy it.

"Anyway, I am sure we could make you comfortable, Robert; and the more you could get about and amuse yourself, the better we shall all be pleased. There need be no difficulty about the travelling, because, whenever you are ready, I will come and fetch you myself."

"Nelly shall go, thank you. I should wish her to become acquainted with your mother; but I would rather not move myself,

at all events this year. I may be stronger next, and more inclined for exertion."

He often spoke in this manner, as if his complaint were curable, and it was the fault of those who had reared him that he was as he was.

"Perhaps your sister also will object to my proposal," said Nigel Brooke, in a disheartened tone; for he was really disappointed at the boy's refusal, and did not perceive that it proceeded as much from a selfish dislike to trouble as anything else.

"Not if I speak to her," replied Robert, confidently. "Would you call her for me?"

"She may be busy," suggested the other.

"Well, if she is, it doesn't matter," was her brother's reply. And so her cousin called her name from the open door.

She came directly, all in a glow and a bustle from the exertions she had been making in turning the mattresses. But she had pulled a little sprig of geranium from somewhere on her way, and brought it to fasten into her brother's buttonhole.

"Now, troublesome boy," she said, stooping to kiss him, "what is it you want?—make haste and say, for I am terribly busy this morning."

"I wish to speak to you, dearest," he replied. "Our cousin wants you to go and pay Aunt Eliza a visit at Orpington this autumn, and grandpapa has given his consent, so say 'thank you,' and tell him how soon you will be ready."

All the colour flew out of Nelly's face.

"Me!—to go to Orpington—what! all alone, Bertie?"

"I wish your brother to come too, Nelly," said Nigel Brooke, "and have been saying all I can think of to persuade him. Perhaps you will be more successful, we want you both."

"Oh! Bertie, you *will* come!" she said, entreatingly.

"My dear Nelly, I wonder you can ask it! I am not so fond of parading my hump-back before company as all that."

"Oh! it isn't a 'hump-back,' " she exclaimed, almost forgetting the former subject, in her anxiety lest her cousin should believe this statement; "it is only his weakness makes him stoop so much," and she looked at the prostrate figure of her brother as a mother might tenderly regard a stricken child.

"Well, it's next door to it then, thanks to the two old fools who had the handling of me; but that's nothing to the purpose. I can't go for several reasons, but you must, Nelly, for as many more."

"Without you, Bertie? all by myself! Oh! I can't go away and leave you alone! who is to look after you, and attend to you, if I go away?"

"Nonsense, Nelly! Aggie can do it all as you well know; besides it will only be for a short time."

"But by myself, darling! and to go away from Bickton and amongst strangers! Oh! I can't do it," and regardless of the presence of her cousin, Nelly began to cry.

The act was a childish one, but her brother's proposal had taken her by surprise, and she had been reared in so secluded and simple a manner, that at eighteen years of age she was not much more than a child.

Nigel Brooke was shocked at the result of his kind intentions.

"Pray don't distress yourself," he said, visibly concerned at the sight of her emotion. "I will not even ask you to go to Orpington, Nelly, if you don't wish it. I thought it would be a pleasure; I want so much that we should all be friends, and enjoy ourselves together, but perhaps you would rather delay your visit until your brother can come also."

But Robert Brooke was not at all anxious that the invitation to Orpington should be withdrawn. He was evidently annoyed with his sister, although he affected to pass it off.

"This is all nonsense, Nelly," he said; "you are only pretending you don't like it, because you want to be pressed. The best thing you can do is to go back to your bedroom, and resolve not to make a goose of yourself."

She swallowed her tears as he spoke to her, and merely saying, "I am very sorry that I have been so foolish," left the room according to his suggestion.

As soon as she was gone, Nigel Brooke was beginning to beg that she should not be worried any more upon the subject, when Robert forestalled him by begging that he would leave the matter to himself.

"In reality she is as pleased as she can be," he said; "but girls think it is the right thing to cry at everything. I will talk to her when you are gone, and write to you about it. Did I hear them say you were going to-day?"

"Yes, I promised my mother that I would be back this evening, and the fly I came in from Reddington, has waited to take me to the station again."

And he shuddered as he recalled the drive he had had thence

the evening before. Could it have been only last evening? What a lapse of time appeared to lie between this and then!

"You have a finer day for your return than you had for coming here," remarked Robert.

"I am glad of it," said the other, briefly.

He observed at the early dinner that Nelly's eyes were very red, but had no opportunity of speaking to her alone, until the afternoon, when the tread of hoofs upon the gravel path took him to the front-door, and he saw her standing beside a small rough pony, which was bridled and saddled much in the same fashion as are donkeys at a watering-place.

"Where are you going to, Nelly?" he inquired, forgetting their conversation of the morning.

"I am going to our vicar's to fetch Bertie's newspapers," she said, shyly, for she thought she must have offended him by her ungracious reception of his invitation.

"And what papers does he lend him?"

"The *Times* of the week, and *Public Opinion*, and the *Guardian*, and sometimes the *Saturday Review*."

"Does he ever get *Punch*?"

"Oh! no; Mr Ray takes no comic papers."

"Would your brother like me to send him a few papers sometimes, Nelly?"

"Oh! very much!" and into her eyes came the old sparkle again.

"And I am to send you a real tiger-skin, am I not, since you refuse to come and fetch it?"

He had put her on her little steed by this time, and was standing by the side looking up into her face.

"You are not angry with me, cousin?" she asked, softly, raising her long dark lashes.

"Angry! what makes you think so?"

"About not going to Orpington; but all by myself you see, and amongst strangers. I should feel so—so miserable!" And the mere idea of her loneliness brought the tears again into Nelly's eyes.

"My dear little cousin!" said Nigel Brooke, taking her hand, "you shall never be asked by me to do a single thing that you don't like. I have told your brother as much, and you must decide for yourself. But I hope you won't look upon me as a stranger, Nelly. You must think of me as a friend. I want very much to be your friend and Robert's."

"Thank you!" she said, gently.

"And now, as I shall be gone probably before you return, you must bid me a cheerful farewell, or I shall take my departure reproaching myself for those tears."

She raised her eyes to his face, and tried to smile, and say she should be glad to see him again.

"That is enough," he replied, "don't distress yourself to make fine speeches. Some day I hope they will not be needed between you and me. God bless you!"

He released her hand, and the next minute the hoofs of the little rough pony were clattering down the gravel path. He followed her to the garden-gate, and shading his eyes, looked after her as she rode away at a canter, until a turn in the road hid her slight swaying figure from his sight. An hour afterwards he was on his way back to Orpington.

CHAPTER VI.

NELLY CONSENTS TO GO TO ORPINGTON.

THE next day, Sunday, was exceedingly hot. Nelly Brooke had been to church at Little Bickton in the morning, and Mrs Weston, the farmer's wife, had offered to drive her over to Cockthorp in her pony-chaise for the afternoon-service, but she had preferred to stay with her brother. It was now about three o'clock; the old grandfather, with a handkerchief over his face to keep off the flies, was dozing in a corner of the dining-room; Robert Brooke lay, as usual, on his sofa; as usual also with a pipe between his teeth, and a tumbler of beer within reach; the mastiff Thug was stretched beside him, and Nelly was sitting on the sill of the door, which opened into the back garden, playing with little Tommy Dobbs.

Tommy Dobbs does not occupy an important position in this story, but he was quite an important personage at that time in the uneventful life of Nelly Brooke. He was the child of one of their poor neighbours, who had been blind from his birth, and into whose sunless existence Nelly had infused the only streak of joy which had ever lightened it. For she had conceived a great compassion for the poor helpless little creature who sat day after day, doing nothing but sun himself at his mother's door, and she had led him so often to the Farm Cottage, that he was able now to find his way there alone, and there was scarcely a day in which he did not present himself to ask for the "good lady."

So the "good lady" and he sat side by side on this Sunday afternoon, and the soft tones of her voice, as she told the child Bible-stories, or a subdued exclamation of surprise or pleasure which occasionally burst from himself, were all the sounds which disturbed the heavy stillness of the day. But even so slight an interruption appeared after a while to irritate her brother.

"I wish you'd send that brat away, Nelly, and come and talk to me," he said, fretfully.

She rose at once and took the blind child by the hand.

"Come, Tommy, let us go into the kitchen, and see if Nurse Aggie has anything good for us."

Little Tommy was a favourite with old Aggie, so she had no objection that he should sit on the matted floor with the cat, whilst she, with horn spectacles astride her nose, pursued her weekly study of the Bible.

"Poor little fellow!" said Nelly, compassionately, as she turned at the door, and saw the boy's sightless eyes, albeit he held a huge wedge of cake which she had given him between his hands, moving in unison with her footsteps, as though he watched her departure, and then, smitten with a sudden impulse, she ran back and kissed him.

The old woman peered above her spectacles in surprise.

"Lor! Miss Nelly, my dear, are you sure his face is clean!"

"It is worse to be blind than to be lame," said the girl, with genuine feeling, as she left the kitchen again.

"That kiss wasn't for yourself, any way," said the old woman, spitefully, to little Tommy, as soon as Nelly had disappeared.

"Good lady gave it me," replied the child, perfectly satisfied with the result.

"Ah! but she was thinking of *him* all the time," muttered the nurse, returning to her Bible; but Tommy consumed his cake, and was quite happy.

"Bertie, darling, what should I do if you were blind?" exclaimed his sister, as she re-entered the dining-room, and sat down with Thug on the carpet at her brother's feet.

"I might just as well be, for aught there is to look at in this place," he replied.

"But think what it must be, dear, to be shut out for ever from the light of the sun, and the sight of the trees and flowers, and never to see the faces you love even in your dreams."

"It can't be much worse," he grumbled, "than for a man to be chained by the leg as I am, debarred from every amusement

usual to fellows of my age, and with the prospect of ending my days without a creature to care whether I live or die."

"Oh, Bertie," exclaimed his sister, "you will always have me!"

"I know that, Nelly, and that I couldn't have a kinder or better sister; but a man, as he goes through life, wants something more than a sister, you see."

"A wife," she said, sadly. He laughed bitterly.

"A *wife*? fancy me with a wife! No! that's what I shall never have, and can never hope to have, but I do not even possess access to such pleasures as might help me to forget my position, and reconcile me to passing my existence alone. I have not the advantage of the veriest cur that limps through the village on three legs. I have lived the life of a dog in this forsaken hole, and I suppose I shall die the death of a dog, and be lamented for about as long a time!"

"Bertie! pray don't talk in that dreadful manner, remember Who sent you the trial, dear, and that it might have been worse."

"I cannot see it!" he replied, "but perhaps it may be bettered, Nelly. You *must* go to Orpington!"

"I thought," she said, hesitating,—“I thought Cousin Nigel said I could wait till you went, Bertie.”

"What he said or did not say, has nothing to do with it. You must go, for both our sakes. Now, just listen to me quietly, and I will tell you why. We have been kept in this place all our lives, without a single advantage. You have had no society but that of people beneath you in station, like the Westons; and if you miss this opportunity of leaving Little Bickton, we may both stick here for ever. You don't suppose that old man," indicating his unconscious grandfather, "will live much longer, do you? and what chance have we of leaving this place after his death, if we refuse to associate with our only relatives. Nigel Brooke is the head of the family, and it will be everything for us to keep friends with him and his mother. Why, Nelly, in another year or so we shall be alone in the world!"

"Never alone whilst we are together, Bertie!" she said, despondingly. "I don't wish to leave Little Bickton. I thought you and I would live together all our lives."

"And so we shall, I hope; but the best chance of it lies before us now. I know nothing of my grandfather's affairs; he may leave us penniless, and you may be obliged to earn your bread, and I to go into the workhouse."

"Oh, Bertie! Bertie!" with wide open eyes.

"It's true, Nell, although I never thought of it so much as I have since our cousin came here. He has all the money and all the influence of the family, and he wishes to befriend us, and we shall be fools if we refuse his offered kindness. He may be the making of us both. In fact, darling, the plain truth is, that you'll never marry as long as you stay in Little Bickton, for there's no one here to fall in love with you; and you must marry, Nell, some day, or I don't know what's to become of us both after my grandfather's death."

The girl started, and a sudden flush, half of shame and half of anger, overspread her features.

Nelly Brooke had, as yet, never thought of marriage as connected with herself, which was owing perhaps to the fact asserted by her brother, that there was no one in Little Bickton to urge the matter on her consideration.

At the same time, the idea, thus rudely presented, wounded her modesty. She was ashamed even before Bertie, that such an event should be talked of as inevitable; she felt as though he had torn away the veil which shrouded some sacred image, and added to this feeling was a vague sense of dread, lest what "must be" should prove the signal of parting between her twin-brother and herself.

"It's nonsense to be affronted, Nell," said Robert, after a pause, seeing that the colour had mounted to her face.

"I am not affronted, dear," she answered, quietly, trying to speak in her usual voice. "But I have never thought of marrying, Bertie. I never wish to be married. I only want to be allowed to live with you, and take care of you, all my life!"

"And that's just what I am trying to bring about," he said; rudely; "but you women are so silly, you never seem to understand a man. Why, which do you think will do me most good? Dragging out my miserable existence in Little Bickton, with an old maid to coddle me, or having a jolly married sister with lots of money, and able to help me a little perhaps, and to make my life more bearable?"

"Oh! not a *little*, Bertie!" she exclaimed, turning her loving eyes upon him; "if ever I have money, it shall all be yours, dear, to do just as you will with; I should have no pleasure in it otherwise."

Robert Brooke had an idea that the prospective husband might raise a slight objection to so wholesale a disposal of his property,

but to have made such a suggestion would have spoilt the effect he was producing on his sister.

"Well, in that case, I might be able to have a drive in your carriage occasionally perhaps, Nelly, or you would give me a nice Bath-chair to be wheeled about in, or a spring-couch to lie on, and"—

"And," she eagerly interposed, taking up the thread of his day dreams, "and you should have the advice of the very best doctors in London, Bertie, and we'd go to some of those foreign watering-places, and try if the mineral baths would strengthen your back, and you should have all the new books to read, and newspapers every day, and just whatever you liked for dinner, and—and—oh! my darling," she concluded, in a burst of excited tears, "you should have everything that I could possibly give you."

He folded her in his arms and kissed her fondly, for he dearly loved his sister, though he loved himself the best.

"I know I should, Nelly, and that's why I want you to go and spend a few weeks at Orpington. It may be the beginning of all this, and you know none of these good things can come to pass unless you marry, and you'll never have a chance of that until you go into society. I don't want to see my pretty sister cooped up in Little Bickton all her life, with no one to admire her but the ploughboys. So you'll go for my sake, won't you?"

His words warned poor Nelly that she had been thinking too fast; the end had seemed so near; she had forgotten there was the dreaded beginning to go through first.

"I will go then, Bertie, for your sake," she said, drying her eyes; "but why can't you come too?"

"Partly, because I do not think it could do me any good to move for so short a time, and partly because I dread displaying my deformities before strangers. You need have no such fear, Nelly. When I am a little stronger, perhaps, or when we come to know Nigel better, I may lose my present objections; but meanwhile, you must be my ambassadress, and prepare them to like me for your sake."

This was not his real reason for wishing his sister to visit Orpington without him. The idea that Nigel Brooke might fall in love with Nelly, had struck him from the moment he had seen them together, and he was quite aware, that not only would matters proceed much better without his presence, but that it was as well his cousin should not be daily reminded of the encumbrance which Nelly would bring with her. Added to which, was

the selfish laziness before mentioned, which prevented his undergoing any inconvenience for the sake of another.

Nelly quitted her position with a sigh. She had promised to go to Orpington, therefore she supposed the question was decided, and that she really must leave home alone. She strolled into the kitchen, and confided her trouble to Aggie with a face of woe, and was surprised that the old nurse did not regard the prospective visit in the same light as she did.

"But I am to go by myself, Nurse Aggie, without either grandpapa or Bertie."

"Lor, Miss Nelly, and the very best thing for you. I never was more pleased to hear of anything in my life—never. What a dear good gentleman, now, to have come all this way just to ask you. And to stay with your aunt too. I remember her a bit in the old days; and I'll lay she's a real lady, as will teach you what it is to behave yourself in company. We shall have you come home with quite different manners, Miss Nelly. And as for your grandpa' and your brother, why you'd never wish, sure, to take those two helpless creatures a trapesing after you everywhere. I'll take good care of them, my dear, never you fear; and you must just think of enjoying yourself and nothing else."

Nelly shook her head dejectedly.

"Oh yes, you will, when you've had a taste of it, take my word for that. But when are you going? for you must have some new dresses, and a bonnet, and ever so many things."

"Must I really?" demanded Nelly.

"In course; you can't go to a grand house like that with only the bits of things you run about Bickton in. You are going amongst gentlefolk, and you must be dressed according."

"Bertie, Aggie says I can't go to Orpington without new dresses and things," whispered Nelly, next time she saw her brother, rather in hopes that the necessity would prove a stumbling-block to the carrying out of the undertaking.

But Robert said the same as Aggie.

"Of course not; who ever thought it? I shall speak to my grandfather when he wakes, and tell him you are going to Orpington, and ask him for some money for you, and then you must get the Westons to take you over to Reddington next market-day, and just buy what you require."

The magnificence of this speech inspired poor Nelly with awe, which was further increased the next morning by her grand-

father calling her after him into the passage, and putting a bank note for five pounds into her hands.

"Here! my dear," he said, "your brother tells me that you wish to go to Orpington, so you will know what this is for, and when you have decided how soon your preparations can be completed, he will write to your cousin and make the necessary arrangements for your journey."

He was turning away without waiting for her thanks, when she caught him by the arm, and said a few grateful words. He gazed at her earnest eyes for a moment, and then stooped and kissed her broad, open brow.

"Bless you, my dear!" he ejaculated, in a trembling voice. "You are very like your mother. I wish you could have been content to stay here; but perhaps 'tis all for the best. Be good, my dear, and be happy—happier than *she* was—happier than *she* was," and so murmuring he left her.

She longed to tell him that she was quite contented, and had always been so; but she feared to contradict what her brother might have said. So she walked back into the dining-room silently.

"Bertie! only think," she said, as she reached it, "a whole five pounds! I have never had so much money in my life before. What *shall* I do with it all?"

To her unsophisticated innocence, that dirty, patched, and scribbled-over country note appeared an almost exhaustless mine of wealth.

"It's little enough," responded her brother, "why didn't the old fellow make it ten! I wonder what he does with all his money. Sleeps on it, I suppose, and we shall have the trouble of ripping it out of his mattress after he's dead. I wish he'd give me five pounds though, I know what I should have done with it."

"What?" demanded his sister eagerly. His manner of speaking of her grandfather annoyed her, because she loved the old man, and did not believe that he was any richer than he appeared; but she did not show her annoyance. Nothing ever had the power to come between her and her love for her brother.

"What would you buy with it, Bertie?"

"Scores of things; first and foremost though, half a dozen bottles of Cogniac to keep my spirits up, and some good tobacco. This of Benson's is trash."

"But would it—would the Cogniac be good for you, Bertie?" she asked, doubtfully.

"As good as anything else; a man must have something to

drink, and this beer is poison ; and next I'd get some pickles and sauces to make old Aggie's eternal hashes and stews go down ; and after that I'm sure I don't know—books perhaps, or papers—anything is acceptable in a place like this, where there is nothing to do."

"Don't you think you could draw, Bertie, if you tried?" said his sister, timidly ; "you often scribble faces on the margins of your books."

"I don't wish to try," he answered, with indifference.

"Or carve wood as Mr Weston's sons do in the winter evenings. Mrs Weston has such pretty brackets which they gave her last Christmas. I wish I could think of some occupation which would amuse you, Bertie."

"It's of no use thinking about it, Nelly, it's part of the curse of not being within hail of a town or any civilised place ; however, what's the good of talking ? It would have been very different if I had been born or brought up like other men. Fetch me a glass of beer, there's a good girl, and don't forget to show Nurse Aggie how I like my bed made before you go. It never feels the same when she has had the handling of it, and by-the-by, have I had my usual number of pillows the last few nights?"

"Just the same, darling ; because when cousin Nigel was here, he had the one off my bed."

"Well, my head is much too low all the same ; I suppose the feathers want repicking, or something of the kind ; however, never mind ! I must endure it."

She fetched him the beer, and went and pulled the only pillow off her own bed, and added it to those on his, and sighed whilst she did so, thinking what a hard lot her brother's was, and how unfair it seemed that in this world some should have so many things to make them happy, and others so few.

Her love blinded her to the fact that her brother's disposition would have rendered him a joyless and discontented creature in any station to which it might have pleased God to call him.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW NELLY SPENT HER FIVE POUNDS.

As soon as Robert Brooke had extracted his sister's promise to go to Orpington, he wrote to his cousin, and two days afterwards,

there arrived a letter for Nelly from her Aunt Eliza, containing a very courteous, if not a very cordial, repetition of her son's invitation, and at the reception of which the poor child lost her last hope, if she yet entertained any, of escape from the ordeal before her.

The only thing left to be done was to ask Mrs Weston to take her to Reddington on the next market-day, and help her to choose her new things ; a request which was no sooner made than granted.

Mrs Weston had occupied a better position in the social scale than that from which farmer's wives are usually selected. Originally the daughter of a hard-working curate, she had been sent forth into the world at an early age to earn her own bread as a second-rate governess, and after twenty or more years of ceaseless drudgery, had been grateful, at the age of forty, to exchange the sparingly-extended hospitalities of her employers for a home of her own, although the warm circle, and plentifully spread board, did belong to a bluff and uneducated farmer. Mr Weston was a widower when she married him, with four half-grown sons ; and although he had a vast respect for "learning" himself, he had entertained some doubts at first how a "lady" would get on with his rough uncultivated boys. The boys themselves may not have been free from a similar fear ; but if so, it was soon dispelled. Mrs Weston entered her new home with a full desire and intention to do her duty there, and from the first day that she had been mistress of Little Bickton Farm, she had never betrayed that the manners or customs of its inmates were different from such as she had been used to see. Insensibly, her superior education had refined and elevated the little circle of which she was the acknowledged head, until the neighbours wondered to see Farmer Weston's boys so different to what they used to be ; and even the boys themselves (not to mention their father) were sensible of the improvement in their condition, although they were scarcely aware of how it had come about. But in their rude way they had grown to love their father's new wife dearly, and "mother" was always sure of the best fruit in summer, and the warmest nook in winter, as well as the ready confidence and sympathy of her husband and his children. And so Mrs Weston was happy ; she had suffered too much from neglect, privation, and unkindness during her youth, not to appreciate the love and comforts of home which were showered upon her now, and she desired no better lot than to be mistress of the farm, and no higher pleasures than its multifarious

duties afforded her. She had been an invaluable friend to Nelly Brooke, notwithstanding that Robert had mentioned her contemptuously as "beneath" them in station, for until she had come to Little Bickton, the girl had run about as wild and untamed as any colt upon the common. It was Mrs Weston who had taught Nelly how to embroider and do fine needlework : it was she who had given her lessons upon the old cracked pianoforte, which she had imported with herself to the farm, and in which she believed as an instrument of worth : it was she also who had sent the girl such books as she possessed, and encouraged her to read and remember them.

It is quite true that Farmer Weston, too shy to take courage from his wife's example, still addressed her as "Miss" or "Miss Nelly," and that his lads never spoke to her at all, but sheepishly slunk away whenever she made her appearance ; still, some of the happiest hours that Nelly could remember had been spent at the farm, and she had become so accustomed to the state of things which reigned there, that it seemed quite natural that Mrs Weston should address her as an equal, whilst the farmer and his sons spoke to her as if she were a superior.

On the morning on which her friend had promised to take her to Reddington, Nelly, arrayed in her alpaca dress and little black bonnet—her precious five-pound note safely stowed away in her pocket—tripped gaily over the patch of common which divided the Farm Cottage from the farm. She was not in the least reconciled to the idea of going to Orpington ; but she greatly anticipated a whole day spent at Reddington, and especially a day spent in the laying out of a five-pound note, for she was not free from her sex's inherent love of shopping, and she had had too little money at her own disposal during her lifetime not to feel the full independence, not to say importance, which attached to her now. So she went singing on her way, and almost forgetful of the purposes to which her purchases were to be applied.

When she reached the farm, she found the double-bodied phaeton which Mr Weston had bought in honour of his second bridal, with its stout cob attached, already standing at the door, and her friends waiting her on the threshold. In a few minutes they were all three snugly packed away, and going at a fast trot down the hill to Reddington. The farmer and his wife were both seated in front, whilst Nelly occupied the back seat, but Mrs Weston managed to turn her figure round, so that they could maintain a conversation all the way. She had heard, of course,

of the reason for the intended purchases, and was almost as interested in the subject as Nelly herself, particularly as the farmer and she had privately agreed that the funds provided by old Mr Brooke were quite inadequate to the probable requirements.

"Now, Nelly dear," she said, as soon as they were fairly started, "we had better decide upon what you intend to buy before we reach Reddington, and then we shall know what shop to go to, and lose no time."

Reddington had been the last place in which Mrs Weston had lived before her marriage, and she was therefore well acquainted with all its resources. Nelly coloured.

"I have hardly thought about it yet," she answered, "but I know that I want a good many things. Aggie says I must have a new dress for Sundays, and a muslin one for the evenings: and then she thinks I can wear this one every day, if I get some nice collars and cuffs. But I am afraid I can't do without another bonnet, Mrs Weston; and I have only one pair of kid gloves."

She might have added, "And I need boots and shoes, and under-linen; and almost everything necessary to a young lady's wardrobe;" but, with all her grand ideas concerning the amount of goods to be purchased with a five pound-note, Nelly knew it would not buy everything, and she had other uses for it floating in her brain.

Mrs Weston looked rather grave.

"That is a good deal, Nelly, to come out of five pounds—but"——

"But surely it will buy more than *that*," exclaimed the girl, with a look almost of alarm, "because if not, I must do with only one dress."

"If it will purchase all you really want, my dear, it will be sufficient," replied Mrs Weston; "but we can hardly tell how far it will go until we ask the price of the materials."

Yet Nelly did not appear satisfied; more than once before they had reached Reddington she asked her friend if she did not think a single morning dress would be sufficient to take with her; or if she might not continue to wear her print frocks if she bought some pretty collars and cuffs to go with them.

"Mr Weston, what is the price of a bottle of Cogniac?" she suddenly demanded, as they were nearing their destination. The farmer laughed.

"You are not thinking of laying in a stock of French brandy,

Miss Nelly, to take with you—are you now? That’s a queer article to be found in a lady’s trunk.”

“Not exactly, but they want some at home.”

“Well, the best is, as far as I know, about seven-and-six the bottle; not that we use much of such up at the Farm.”

“Seven-and-six!” exclaimed Nelly; “oh! that’s very dear.”

“More than your grandpapa would like to give for it, I am sure, Nelly,” said Mrs Weston. “But if he wants a little brandy to keep in the house for medicinal uses, a good British answers all the purpose, and is much cheaper.”

“I don’t think ‘good British’ would do,” replied Nelly, shaking her head with an air of disappointment.

The farmer and his wife wondered since when old Mr Brooke had grown so fastidious about his brandy; but they made no comment on the remark. When they reached Reddington, and Mr Weston having put up his horse and phaeton at an inn, strolled off to the market-place, leaving his wife and her young friend to their own devices, Nelly grew terribly restless. She asked the most frivolous of questions: wanted to know which was the best grocer, and the best tobacconist in the town, and stopped to gaze in at the window of every bookseller’s shop which they passed, appearing altogether to be in so unsettled a state, that Mrs Weston was forced to remind her that an important business like choosing dresses and bonnets was not to be got over in a minute, and that if she wished to discharge it properly, she had better accompany her at once to the draper’s. But when there, Nelly Brooke did not appear to know her own mind better than before. First, she consented, on her friend’s advice, to have a *barége* dress; but as soon as she heard that it was a material which required trimming, she changed her mind, and listened to a suggestion from the shopman, that as black silk could be worn perfectly plain, it would certainly be the most suitable dress for her purpose. But, to her dismay, the silks came to four and five pounds a piece; and when a cheaper description was placed before her, she tossed it on one side, declaring she would rather have a good alpaca. The alpacas were immediately on the counter.

“Must I decide at once?” said Nelly, with a comical look of distress on her face.

Mrs Weston smilingly replied that of course she could do as she liked, but the morning was going, and she must remember that she had several other articles to look at.

“I want some collars and cuffs, if you please,” she said to the

man in attendance. The dress pieces were pushed to one side, and boxes of collars and cuffs produced. Nelly chose half-a-dozen of the very plainest sets.

"Won't you have some a little more 'dressy'?" whispered Mrs Weston. But she shook her head, with the rejoinder, "I hate 'dressy' things." The shopman stared: he had not been used to hear such sentiments from the lips of the Reddington young ladies. At last, after a good deal of persuasion and indecision, and deep calculation, Nelly Brooke decided to purchase a black alpaca dress for the morning, and a white muslin for the evening, which, together with a few minor articles which were urgently necessary, ran away with more than two pounds of her money.

"But where are the trimmings, my dear?" said Mrs Weston, with a look of surprise at the omission.

"I do not wish for any trimmings," replied Nelly. "I have never worn any in Bicton."

"But it will be so different where you are going to, my dear," urged her friend. But the girl was resolute; she stowed away the change of her five-pound note in her little purse, and declared that she had purchased all that was needful.

"Remember, I have to buy a bonnet still," she said, "and, I am afraid, a pair of boots—oh, no! I must do without the boots" (looking down at her own). "These are pretty good, and I shall only be there for a few weeks."

"But why should you not purchase yourself boots, my dear?" asked Mrs Weston; "your grandpapa intended you to spend the money on your clothes, and you have two pounds ten left."

"Yes! but I want several other things," was the mysterious reply.

The bonnet and a pair of shoes were chosen and paid for; and then Mrs Weston announced her intention of taking Nelly to dine at the inn where the horse had been put up, and where her husband promised to join them. The inn was in the centre of the town. For a few seconds before she reached it, her attention had been diverted from her young friend by some bustle in the street, and when she turned to speak to her, she found, to her astonishment, that Nelly was gone. At first she thought they must have missed each other, and was hurrying back the way she came, when the farmer joined her, and set her mind at rest.

"So you've lost Miss Nelly," he said, laughing. "I saw the little jade in a grocer's shop hard by, and made sure you were close beside her, but she told me she had given you the slip, and that I was to hasten after you, and say she wouldn't be more than

ten minutes." And accordingly in about that time she did join them, laden with parcels, breathless and brimming over with excuses.

"Oh, Mrs Weston! I hope you won't be angry at my leaving you; but I saw something in a shop which I so much wanted; and I did not think it would take me so long." And having entered the inn with the farmer and his wife, she deposited her parcels, five or six in number, upon the table.

"Why Nelly, what are these?" demanded Mrs Weston, as she took them up and examined them.

"They are only pickles, Mrs Weston, and sardines, and some olives—Bertie is so fond of olives—and I wanted to get him a few things of this sort before I started; they are not to be procured, you know, in Bickton. Now, I have only the tobacco to buy, and I shall have quite done." And the girl's face expressed more pleasure as she contemplated her pickles and sauces than it had done over any of the ribbons and laces in the draper's shop. Mrs Weston, knowing how unselfish was her nature, guessed the truth concerning what Nelly affected to term her commissions, yet she took an opportunity when the farmer was absent to say:

"If these things are for the housekeeping, Nelly, you had better let me pay for them, my dear, or your ready money will run short. Your grandpapa can repay me at any time, you know." But the deep colour which flew to the girl's face, and the look of anxiety with which she begged to be allowed to have her own way in the matter, silenced whilst it convinced her.

"Don't say anything about it, dear Mrs Weston," she entreated; "it is the only pleasure I have in the money, and I have bought everything I want now—everything."

After dinner, they went into the town again, and there Nelly really had her way; first flying into a shop to ask the cost of some new book, and coming out with a look of disappointment at its "unheard-of price;" then discoursing knowingly to the tobacconist on the proper quantities and qualities which were needful to make up the mixture which Bertie loved; and rashly investing seven and sixpence of her remaining coin on the "loveliest little briar-root pipe" she had ever seen; anon, purchasing in a moment of excitement an air pillow, which she was sure was "just the thing" for her brother's back, and which completely swallowed up the remnant of her little fortune. Not till the air pillow and briar-root pipe were fairly in her possession, did she remember that not one book, or one bottle of cogniac, were numbered amongst her treasures.

"Oh ! I wish I had thought of that before," she exclaimed, with a look of annoyance, to Mrs Weston. "This pillow is charming, and so is the pipe, but I think perhaps dear Bertie would have liked the brandy best."

"If the brandy was for your brother, my dear," was the grave reply, "I think it is just as well you have not procured it. It would soon be gone, you know, and the cushion and pipe are much more useful, and will last for a long time." And so Nelly was comforted with respect to her presents for Bertie, and her only remaining regret was, that she had been so unkind as to forget to keep a few shillings to expend on a keepsake for little Tommy Dobbs.

"Poor little Tommy," she said ; "he will miss me so much : I should like to have left him something to comfort him during my absence."

Even this want was supplied, for after the phaeton had been laden with her treasures, and she was once more jogging homewards, kind Mrs Weston put a small parcel into her hands.

"A musical toy for little Tommy, my dear, which you must give him from yourself. He cannot see, and so I thought the best present for him was something he can *hear*." And Nelly thought, as she received it, that now there was really nothing in the world that she could possibly want. The farmer insisted upon driving her up to the cottage door, and seeing herself and her purchases safely deposited at home—and never did a more radiant creature burst into that dull parlour than did Nelly Brooke on her return from Reddington. She carried in her parcels one after another, and piled them on the table : she would not stop to eat or drink or disrobe herself, before she cut the strings asunder, and displayed all her treasures before the admiring eyes of Bertie and old Nurse Aggie.

"There ! Bertie—what do you think of that—and that—and that," she exclaimed, as she pulled the papers successively off bottles of pickled onions, walnuts, and gherkins ; off the olives and the sardines, and the Harvey's sauce ; and produced the "lovely" briar-root pipe, and the big packet of tobacco ; and blew out the wonderful air cushion, till she made herself look like an inflated cherubim. Her brother was delighted, as he had reason to be, and, fortunately, forgot all about his wish for the cogniac, whilst he declared she was a darling, and a "jolly little brick," and they were the most acceptable presents she could possibly have bought him, &c. And she listened to his thanks with

sparkling eyes, and watched his undisguised pleasure with rapture.

"But where are your own things, Miss Nelly?" now demanded the old nurse, in tones decidedly sour; "what *I* want to see, is your new dresses, and bonnets, and what-nots, which are to make you smart for your visit to Orpington."

"Patience, nurse, patience!" cried the girl gaily; "you shall see everything in time." And she proceeded to unpack the other parcels.

"Is them all?" said old Aggie, in a dissatisfied tone, as the plain-looking pieces of alpaca and book-muslin, and the linen collars and cuffs, and the sandalled shoes and the gray kid gloves, came into view.

"No! here's my bonnet, nurse! isn't it a beauty?" said Nelly, as she displayed a fragile erection of tulle and flowers; one of the stock of the summer past, which had been left on hand.

"Well! I call it just trumpery," said the old woman indignantly; "and it appears to me that you've spent all your money on pickles and such like trash, instead of on the articles for which 'twas given you. But I might have guessed 'twould be so, if I hadn't been a fool;" and grumbling to herself, she went back into the kitchen.

"Never mind what she says, darling!" said Nelly, stooping to kiss her brother; "I've got everything that I want, and no one can have more; and I *am* so glad you are pleased with what I bought you."

And for the next few days she sat steadily down to cut out and stitch, and gather; feeling all a woman's keen satisfaction in making the alpaca, and muslin, and other materials, answer the purposes for which they had been bought, and without one feminine regret for the ribbons and laces which had transformed themselves into briar-root pipes and pickles.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS BROOKE GIVES HER OPINION OF THE MATTER.

ORPINGTON CHASE was not a house which had been taken and furnished with a view to being re-let. It was part of the family property of a gentleman whose wife, being threatened with consumption, had been advised to take up her residence abroad for the

next few years, and her husband had let the Chase sooner than leave it in the hands of servants. He had advertised more for a tenant who would take every care of the property, than for one who would pay a high rental, and Nigel Brooke, fresh from Calcutta, with his pockets full of money and every intention, with all necessary prudence, of spending it, seemed just the man to take a pride in keeping up the appearance of the Chase. So it had been handed over to his charge for three years certain, with the proviso that a regulated number of gardeners and gamekeepers should be kept on the premises, to look after the plantations and preserves by which they were surrounded.

The inside of the house was fully in keeping with the outside ; it was everything, in fact, that gentlepeople who wished to live in the country and maintain a certain style could desire ; although Mrs Brooke, with her grand Calcutta ideas, was wont to speak rather disparagingly of it than otherwise, and hint that it was nothing to what she had been accustomed to in India. Nigel Brooke had more than once, in conversation with his grandfather, mentioned the house as his ; and although it was not often that he so betrayed himself, he spoke the truth. His mother had been left very well off at his father's death, but the bulk of the property had descended to him ; and by this disposition of his wealth, the late Mr Brooke had shown a confidence in his son which was well deserved.

Nigel was not a man who would see his mother want a single luxury which his money could procure her. At the same time, he was past the meridian of his youth ; if he ever married, he felt it must be soon ; and he was grateful to the foresight which had not left him dependent, in such an event, upon the generosity of a capricious woman, nor made his mother's death the signal of his own emancipation from the necessity of work. It was he, then, who had taken the Chase, and was responsible for its maintenance ! but he would not have done so, had Mrs Brooke not promised to continue to live with him there until he should be married or return to India.

On the afternoon on which Nelly Brooke was expected at Orpington, her aunt was sitting alone in the library, when her son entered the room.

Nigel was a great contrast to his mother ; in fact, he was so utterly unlike her, that no stranger would have taken them to be even related. He was a tall, slight man, with remarkably fair hair, which he wore cut close to his head ; and with the exception

of an almost colourless pair of moustaches, his face and chin were clean-shorn. He had gray eyes, a well-shaped nose, and a mouth which most people at first sight pronounced cold, on account of a propensity which it had of looking more sarcastic than it felt, but which, in reality, hid a greater depth of feeling than is possessed by the owner of many a pouting rosebud pair of lips. He was very like what his father had been, and through him, bore a family likeness to the old man at Little Bickton.

His mother, on the contrary, was a very small woman, active and light, with dark hair and eyes, and Jewish features—a woman who, beneath the ordeal of an Indian life, had become perfectly incapable of doing anything for herself, and only knew how to use her tongue and her feet. Moreover, she constantly offended the fastidious eye of her son, by employing too many colours in her dress, and these not well assorted. On the present occasion she was magnificently attired, but the fawn-coloured silk, laden with purple velvet trimmings, which her chilly nature had caused her already to adopt, was not in unison with the point-lace cap streaming with rose-coloured ribbons, nor the set of malachite with which she had adorned herself. Nigel had already seen her in this costume, yet his brow contracted even in his haste, as it again met his view.

“Is the carriage round, mother?” he asked, quickly.

“I suppose it is, Nigel, if you ordered it,” replied Mrs Brooke, in a tone which did not betoken pleasure at the question; “but I really cannot see the necessity for your going to the station yourself to meet your cousin. You have offered your escort once, and it has been refused; surely that is sufficient.”

Nigel Brooke had volunteered to meet Nelly at Reddington, and bring her the whole way to Hilstone, but both she and her brother had justly thought that this was too much to accept from him, and had declined on the score that Mr Weston had promised to see Nelly into the train, and put her under the care of any lady who should be travelling the same road.

“This is quite different!” he said, impatiently; “it would be a sorry welcome to let the poor child arrive at the station and find nothing but an empty carriage to meet her.”

“Well, from all accounts, they did not even pay you *that* compliment when you went to see them,” remarked his mother, spitefully.

“Mother, you are ungenerous! You know that it is out of

their power to show any one such an attention ; what they *could* do they did."

"Ay ! and you call your grandfather's reception of you doing what he could, I suppose ; to say nothing of the reception he accorded your offer to help himself and your cousins—if they *are* your cousins—the old savage ! But in his best days he was as churlish as a bear."

"He has had great provocation to become savage," said her son, with a sigh ; "and though no one could regret his decision more than I did, I do not know whether, under similar circumstances, I should not have said the same myself."

"You are infatuated about these people," exclaimed Mrs Brooke ; "I told you what you need expect before you went to see them, but you would not take my advice. Still, I should have thought that having performed what you considered a duty, and had your kindness flung in your face again, you might have been contented and let matters rest there."

"I shall *never* be contented," replied her son, emphatically, "until I feel that I have in some measure repaired the injury my father caused them by his rashness. Had he left a debt unpaid behind him, you would have been the first, I hope, to urge me to do what was right. Cannot you see that this is a higher, a more sacred obligation, than any mere money matter could be ?"

"Oh ! that is very fine talking, and sounds very well, my dear Nigel," replied his mother, affecting to smile at his enthusiasm, "but if you thoroughly examine the case, you will find that your sense of honour is a very Quixotic one, and leads you unnecessarily astray. The real truth being that your poor dear father, very far from injuring these young people (who were not even in the world at the time), was fighting in their mother's cause when he deprived them of a father who, I am quite sure, was not worth having. It was just a chance : either he or his opponent must have fallen, and had it turned out otherwise you would have been the sufferer. Besides, at that time, no one thought anything of duels ; they were matters of daily occurrence, and the world would as soon have thought of blaming the survivor for surviving, as for not having missed his man."

And Mrs Brooke passed her cambric handkerchief over her mouth, as though living and dying were subjects of equal indifference to her. Her son bit his lip, but showed no other sign of annoyance.

"Whether he were right or wrong, mother, I have no wish to

argue. I trust he thought he was doing right for his own sake, but that cannot atone for the great misfortune which followed his act. The fact is indisputable that he deprived those children at one blow of both their parents; and that my firm intention is, as far as in me lies, to supply the loss to them."

Mrs Brooke started at the energy of her son's words, but she attempted to pass off the action by saying—

"I think you can hardly consider how much your sentence seems to imply, Nigel."

"It cannot imply too much," he answered, readily; "and I should wish you entirely to understand me on this point. I have sworn before God, mother, and in my grandfather's presence, that whilst I live, neither Robert nor Helena shall ever want a friend, and when I took that oath, I fully meant, by the help of Heaven, to keep it."

"Well, I confess I hardly thought your sense of obligation would have carried you quite so far as that, Nigel," remarked his mother, turning away to hide her chagrin.

"Wisely or not, it did so, and therefore I have now no choice even if I wished it. The question is, mother, will you receive this young girl kindly, and as a lady should be received, for my sake, or shall we have to quarrel about it?"

He spoke gently, but his voice was very firm. Mrs Brooke tried to evade the main point of the question.

"As to receiving her like a lady, Nigel, I should think my worst enemy could never say that I was ignorant of the rules of society,—I who have entertained at my table the wife of the Governor-General of India, to say nothing of"—

"Yes! mother," interposed her son, "but the reception due to a governor-general's wife is just what I do not wish you to extend to my poor little cousin. Remember that she is almost a child, fresh from the country: strange to every thing and body here, and that this is the first time she has ever left her home. Come, mother, promise me you'll welcome Nelly kindly for my sake, and not frighten her out of her wits with any grandeur or formality;" and as he spoke, he stooped and kissed his mother on the forehead. Mrs Brooke was mollified at once: she was not an ill-natured woman, she was only terribly jealous of, and up-in-arms against, anybody in whom her son appeared to take an interest.

"Well! well!" she said, as she shook out her streamers again, "if you are really bent upon meeting the girl, you had better go at once, for the train is due at five o'clock. But don't forget,

Nigel, that dinner is at seven, and that the Johnstones are coming."

"I thought we were to be alone to-night," he said, with a look of vexation.

"It's only the two girls and their brother: I could not avoid asking them, for they almost begged me to do so. If Helena should be very tired after her journey, I can send up her dinner into her own room."

"Oh! I should not think she would require that," was Nigel's remark, as he left the room.

"Tiresome little creature!" ejaculated Mrs Brooke, as the door closed behind him; "I daresay she will be more trouble than a dozen fine ladies put together; these rustics always are, with their rawness and their ignorance, and their eternal blushing. However, perhaps Nigel himself will get sick of her after a time. It's a new scheme of his, and he is always very hot after the last idea."

Nigel Brooke did not spare his horses on the way to Hilstone station, yet he did not arrive there much too soon, for the expected train came puffing alongside the platform a minute after he had reached it. He had no difficulty in discovering his Cousin Nelly, for her expectant face was pressed against one of the windows, filled with an expression which was half fear and half curiosity, until she caught sight of himself, and then it changed to unmitigated pleasure.

The poor child had cried so much, and seen and thought so much since Farmer Weston had placed her in the train at Red-dington that morning, that Little Bickton already appeared drifting far away from her, and the face of her Cousin Nigel, till so lately that of a stranger, was transformed into the face of a friend.

"How kind of you to come and meet me," she said, when he handed her out upon the platform.

"Did you think I would allow you to arrive here all by yourself?" he answered, as he drew her hand within his arm. Even then he observed how many of the passengers, busy with their own belongings, still found time to turn round and gaze again at the fresh, innocent face, which looked so gratefully into his. Her luggage having been extricated from the mass, Nigel drew her away from the crowded station; and in another minute they were driving together towards Orpington Chase.

"You have been crying, Nelly!" said her cousin, as he scrutinised her features. The girl blushed as if she had been detected in something wrong.

"I couldn't help it," she said, humbly; "it wasn't much, but I am very much obliged to you, Cousin Nigel, and to Aunt Eliza, for asking me to stay at Orpington."

"Don't tell a story, child," he answered, playfully; "you are not obliged, at least at present; but I hope you may be, some day. You must remember, it's for Bertie's good, as well as for your own."

"I do remember it," she said, ingenuously, "for Bertie told me so, and I mean to be very happy, cousin," with a slight quiver in her voice.

"Whilst your heart is away at Little Bickton?" he said, laughing. But the charge was not denied.

"I will try to do everything to make Aunt Eliza like me," she continued, doubtfully; "and if I am stupid, you must tell me how."

"You must try to do nothing, Nelly; but just be yourself, and my mother will be sure to love you for your own sake," and then he turned the conversation, and spoke to her of Thug and old Aggie, and anything which he hoped would prevent her thoughts dwelling upon the coming introduction.

But as the carriage drew up at the hall door of the Chase, and he took her hand to help her to alight, he felt how she was trembling.

"Nelly, I thought you were never frightened at anything," he said, reproachfully, as he lingered with her for a minute in the long corridor which led to the library.

"Only a little," she whispered. But she seemed such a child in comparison with himself, and so lonely, except for his countenance and protection, that his whole heart went out to her, and he felt as though her fears were a reproach to him.

"But there is nothing to be frightened at, my child, even for a moment," he said, earnestly. "Nelly, you are in my house now, and if ever you have a fear unallayed or a desire ungratified, it will be your own fault."

She looked up in surprise at the warmth and energy of his assertion. But there was no mistaking the sincerity of the gaze which met her own, and a thrill of gratitude for her cousin's kindness passed through her bosom even as his hand was on the lock of the library door.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST EVENING AT ORPINGTON CHASE.

BUT the dreaded introduction was not so formidable after all. "Aunt Eliza" was alone, and although she did commence the

acquaintance by dropping a curtesy to her orphan niece, which would have been much more suitable to the reception of the wife of a governor-general, a look from her son caused her to change her manner almost immediately, and advancing to meet Nelly, she took her hand and kissed her, and inquired how she had borne the journey, in a fashion which, if not very affectionate, was at least free from formality. And Nelly, to her own surprise, felt no intimidation after the first few seconds. She had been reared in such obscurity, that she had had no opportunity of testing her powers of self-assurance, and was agreeably disappointed, after a short time, to find that she could answer her aunt's questions concerning herself and her brother with as little shyness as if she had been talking with her Cousin Nigel. The latter knowing that the two women would become much more familiar if he were absent, now rose saying—

“Well, mother, having delivered my Cousin Helena into your charge, I will take a little stroll before dinner.”

A slight look of alarm passed over Nelly's face as she heard that the protection of Nigel's presence was to be withdrawn from her; but as Mrs Brooke took the opportunity also to rise, and say, that in that case she would show her niece to her room, she had no time to allow the feeling to gain ground.

She followed her aunt out of the library, and up the wide, carpeted staircase with its polished banisters, and along the upper corridor, which corresponded with that below, and at one end of which was situated the bedroom which had been prepared for her use.

“This is your room,” said Mrs Brooke, as she ushered her into it, “and I trust you will find everything comfortable. I did not order a fire to be lighted, as people's ideas about heat and cold in this climate seem so to differ; but if you have been used to one, my dear, pray order it.”

“I have not been used to one,” said Nelly, simply, although she felt inclined to smile at the notion of a fire in her bedroom in August.

“And I have given orders for Pinner, the upper housemaid, to attend to your bell. Ah! here she is,” as a smart and rather pert-looking servant-maid entered the room. “Pinner, this is Miss Brooke, and you will see that she has everything she requires during her stay with us.”

“Certainly, mem,” replied the maid.

“And as Pinner is here to look after you, I don't think you will

require me any longer ;” and so saying, Mrs Brooke left the large room with the forlorn little girl sitting in the centre of it, without having once bid her welcome to her house, or expressed a wish that she would be happy whilst there.

But though Nelly was forlorn, she no longer felt any fear. This beautifully-furnished room was very different from what she had been accustomed to ; and this smart attendant with a lace cap on the back of her head, not at all like old Nurse Aggie ; but her soul was not one to be intimidated by the sight of fine furniture, nor the pertness of servant-maids. Although from her birth she had been poorly clothed and surrounded, she had always maintained the inherent sense of being a gentlewoman ; and that Pinner should be better clad than herself could only surprise her ; it had no power to make her for a minute permit the woman to address her but as a servant should address a lady.

Consequently, when she pertly asked—

“Have you your keys, miss ? for if so, I had better lay out your things,” Pinner was amazed by the new comer, whom she had rightly taken for a poor relation of her mistress, turning round upon her calmly, with the answer—

“If you have uncorded the box, that is sufficient ; I can unpack it myself.”

“But you had best let me do it perhaps,” debated the maid, “for you’ve got your ‘air to dress, and it don’t want more than half an hour to the dinner-bell now.”

Familiarly as Nelly Brooke had been brought up with her old nurse, she had never been spoken to by Aggie in such a tone as she now heard from the pert menial before her. She turned her head, and regarded Pinner with eyes full of solemn surprise. There was something in the look which awed the woman.

“Will you please to ring then, miss, when you wish me to fasten your dress ?” she added, more respectfully.

“I do not want you to do anything for me, thank you,” said Nelly. “I have been accustomed to wait upon myself, so you can go ;” and thereupon the housemaid departed in high dudgeon to inform the servants’ hall that she “never see such *hairs* as the rubbidge giv’ herself—never.”

Meanwhile Nelly unlocked her box, and placed her modest wardrobe in the chest of drawers, and shook out the folds of the muslin dress she was about to wear. It looked very fresh and simple, and pretty, on this first occasion of its introduction to the world ; almost as much so as herself, although the only orna-

ments she possessed to wear with it were a few black velvet bows. When she had well brushed her luxuriant hair, and coiled it in thick plaits round the back of her head, as old Aggie had told her it would be right to do when she got amongst the "gentlefolk," and had further adorned herself with the new dress, Nelly quite started to see her reflection in the long pier glass with which her bedroom was provided. She had not thought she could look so "nice;" "pretty" would have sounded too presumptuous a word to use with regard to herself; but she certainly looked "nice," or would do so, were she not so brown. She wished Bertie could see her; only just for a second! And at that moment the thought of her brother even had not the power to bring more than a flash of pain with it, for what with the bustle and novelty of the situation, the girl was experiencing more excitement than she had ever done before, and as yet it left her no time for being miserable. But with the clang of the dinner-bell came the idea of finding her way into the library again, alone, and with it a slight return of her first shyness. Still she knew it must be done, and as a preliminary step peeped furtively out of her bedroom door. What was her relief to see the tall figure of her Cousin Nigel at the other end of the corridor, pacing up and down like a patrol, and evidently waiting for some one. She almost ran towards him, with the request—

"Oh, cousin! will you let me go down-stairs with you?" which made him smile.

"Why, I was only waiting for you, Nelly! I thought you might be puzzled, at first, to find your way about the house alone."

"How very kind you are to me!"

The remark was made in perfect good faith, and without the least idea of coquetry, and Nigel Brooke thought, and truly, that in the whole course of his five and thirty years of life he had never met with such an unsophisticated bit of innocence as his Cousin Nelly before. When his mother saw him enter the library with the girl upon his arm, she slightly frowned.

The dinner-bell had rung for more than five minutes, and the Misses Johnstone, in pink gauze dresses, had been eagerly watching for his appearance three times as long, and he had kept them all waiting in order to bring in that country chit in book-muslin. But Nigel Brooke cared nothing for his mother's frowns—if he noticed them. He introduced his cousin to the other young ladies, and then, without relinquishing his hold of her, presented

his other arm to the elder Miss Johnstone, and begged the brother to take in his younger sister with Mrs Brooke.

"It is not quite the right thing, I know," he laughingly said, as he led the way to the dining-room; "but as we are only two gentlemen to four ladies, I can think of no better arrangement."

His mother thought it would have been better if he had taken both the sisters, and left his cousin to go in with herself, but she knew her son too well to say so.

As Nelly Brooke had not as yet been awed by any of the unusual grandeur of the Chase, neither had the appearance of a dinner, such as she had never seen before, handed to her by the most consequential of serving-men, any power to affect her.

She had read of instances in which people fresh from the country had been ready to sink into the earth with confusion at the mistakes they made when they found themselves sitting for the first time at a well-appointed table, and it was the recollection of some such tales that had made her imagine that she should never learn how to behave herself when she mixed in society, and exaggerate the misery and strangeness which she should feel on going there.

But although she was very silent, and never spoke except when she was spoken to, it was of her equals she was shy, not of her inferiors. With respect to the dinner and the domestics, she was as perfectly at her ease as if she had been carving a leg of mutton for Bertie and her grandfather, and old Aggie had stood by to hand the plates. She just took what she fancied, and rejected what she did not require; and when her aunt, thinking she was bashful, remonstrated with her on refusing so many courses, she answered without the least hesitation—

"Thank you, Aunt Eliza, but I am no longer hungry. I am not accustomed to eat so much at dinner."

And although the Misses Johnstone, who had partaken of everything which had been handed to them, smiled visibly at such a comical idea, Nelly did not perceive that the smile had been provoked by what she had said, and remained quite free from confusion.

The dessert was placed on the table; and after a while, Mrs Brooke, with a glance which included the three young ladies, rose from her seat.

Nelly had not comprehended the meaning of the look, but of course she could not mistake the action, and she rose also, but before she left the table she bent her head over it, and with folded hands said a grace to herself; which ceremony had been gone

through at the commencement of the meal, but omitted at the removal of the cloth.

The act was unusual : but it was scarcely entitled to be called a breach of manners, and the girl herself did it as a matter of habit, without once thinking whether it was right or wrong. But as she raised her head, she perceived that she had made a mistake. The Johnstones were audibly tittering ; and Mrs Brooke had her handkerchief to her mouth ; though the two young men were simply regarding her with interest ; for it is proverbial that careless men have always more respect for religion than careless women. This time Nelly did colour ; but it was from fear lest her aunt and cousin should be annoyed at the display of her ignorance, and she glanced towards Nigel imploringly.

"Thank you, Nelly," he said, kindly ; "you have reminded us all of our duty : I will not forget it to-morrow."

At these words the Misses Johnstone suddenly ceased their giggling, for they had a great desire to please the master of the Chase.

"I didn't mean to do that," replied Nelly, blushing still deeper at the idea that her aunt might think she did ; "but I am so used to it, that I scarcely thought what I was doing. Was it very stupid of me, Aunt Eliza ?" she whispered to Mrs Brooke, as she found herself by her side in the drawing-room.

"Not stupid, my dear, exactly," replied her aunt, rather touched by the anxiety displayed in the childish appeal ; "but rather unusual, perhaps : however, I have no doubt my son will pronounce the grace at its proper time to-morrow ;" and with this assurance, poor Nelly was obliged to rest contented.

The Misses Johnstone were what is termed "fine girls," who played and sang very brilliantly, and dressed very low, and set their caps very decidedly at the son of their hostess. They were loud in their admiration of everything at the Chase, including its master, and when the gentlemen entered the drawing-room that evening, Nigel Brooke found them seated on a sofa, one on either side of his mother, loading her with caresses and flattery, to which she appeared readily to respond. The sight seemed to displease him, for he crossed to the farther end of the room, and sat down by his cousin, with his back towards the group on the sofa.

The short spell of loneliness to which Nelly had been subjected between the time the ladies had left the dining-room, and this when Nigel joined her again, seemed already to have had its effect on her spirits, for her cousin found her more silent than before, and read her dejection in her looks.

In order to amuse her he fetched several volumes of the "Art Union," and proceeded to show her the plates. But though she admired them very much, they did not divert her melancholy. The slight ridicule which she had incurred had sent her thoughts back to Little Bickton, where everything she did was right, and set them dwelling on the many doubts and fears which she had entertained about paying this very visit. She almost broke down at a print of the "Healing of the Cripple by the Apostles, at the gate called Beautiful," because, she said, it so reminded her of her brother.

"I wonder what dear Bertie is doing now," she whispered, with a woe-begone face, to her cousin, as something very like a tear glistened in the corner of her eye.

"Smoking his pipe, I daresay," he replied, cheerily, "or having his tea, or wondering, on his part, what his silly little sister is doing towards keeping her promise to try and enjoy herself."

She smiled at his suggestion, but it was a very sad smile. Nigel seemed afraid of what might follow it, and looked about him in search of a diversion. In another minute he had jumped up and asked the elder Miss Johnstone to sing. The young lady was only too eager to oblige, and warbled "Why do I weep for thee?" with great emphasis, whilst he devoted himself to turning over the leaves of her music, with a view to giving Nelly an opportunity to recover herself. As soon as her sister had concluded, the other Miss Johnstone sat down, and rattled off the last new waltzes with considerable brilliancy. The attention of Nelly was diverted from Little Bickton; she was really fond of music, and the pretty melody attracted her, so that after a while she left her seat, and drew nearer to the piano. As soon as the waltzes were concluded, the young ladies both addressed her at once, begging that she would "favour" them with a song.

"I do not sing," she replied, gently.

"Then will you play something?"

"I do not play either," she repeated.

"Good gracious, child!" said her aunt, sharply looking up from some netting, over which she was considerably puzzling herself; "what *do* you do?"

The querulous tone nettled the girl, and she answered bluntly, "Nothing."

"Oh, indeed!" remarked Mrs Brooke, with her eyes still on her work; whilst the young ladies and their brother laughed;

and Nigel said, with indignation, albeit he tried to appear careless of the matter—

“That is not the case, Nelly; you can do many more things than most young ladies—as you know very well.”

“Ah! but not things to *amuse* people with,” she answered quickly. “I have told you that I never play the piano before any one but Bertie or Mrs Weston.”

“Oh! never mind, it is not of the slightest consequence,” said her aunt, “I have no doubt that Miss Johnstone will be kind enough to favour us with another song. You are both so clever, my dears,” addressing herself exclusively to the sisters, “that I wish you would see if you could help me with this netting—I am afraid I have got it into a sad bungle;” and she pulled away at her silk as she spoke.

“Oh! pray don’t apply to me, dearest Mrs Brooke,” exclaimed the elder, holding up her hands in mock alarm; “I am the naughtiest, laziest girl possible for needlework, and never touch any; just ask my sister if I am not telling the truth.”

“Well, you know I am just as bad!” returned the other, as if the confession were rather meritorious, “and really nowadays, what with one thing and another, I can’t understand what time people find for needlework. And I never did any netting in my life, dear Mrs Brooke, or I should have been delighted, I’m sure.” And she skipped off to the piano again without even inquiring into the nature of the difficulty.

“It’s very provoking,” sighed poor Mrs Brooke, as she looked round with an air of helpless distress. “I thought I was going on so nicely, and then Mrs Chamberlain asked to have the foundation which she had lent me back again, and so I had to cut my netting off it, and it has not looked right since. I often think I will never try to do a piece of fancy work again, for servants are so provoking, they are of no use at all in a case like this.”

“May I try to help you, aunt?” said Nelly, timidly.

“My dear! I do not suppose that you can understand anything about it—this is mere idle work.”

“I know how to net,” she replied, quietly. She took the tangled web from off her aunt’s foot, and examined it. “You have not yet picked out the stitches which you cut off,” she said presently, as she proceeded to remedy the mistake.

“But they won’t come out; the knots are so hard,” urged Mrs Brooke.

“Not if you pull them the right way, aunt! Look—just as

I do—if you touch the knot on this side it loosens at once, but if on the other, you will only fray the silk and draw it tighter.”

“Well! that’s wonderful,” exclaimed Mrs Brooke, peering at the operation through her spectacles; “and could you set it all right, my dear, without a foundation?”

“Oh yes!” replied Nelly, smiling; “but if you can spare me your mesh and needle, I will make you a foundation in half an hour.”

“And where did you learn this art?” asked her aunt, looking at the girl as she worked, with almost as much curiosity as if she had seen a donkey begin to net.

“Is it an art?” said Nelly, laughing, the first time Nigel had seen her laugh in his mother’s presence—“we don’t call it so at Little Bickton; for every child there can make nets for the cherry trees, and that is the only use I have seen it put to.”

Mrs Brooke was much more gracious in her behaviour towards her niece after she discovered that she had been accustomed to do all kinds of needlework, both plain and fancy; for she was an indolent useless creature herself, and she fancied it might be very convenient—since she must entertain a raw girl from the country for so many weeks—to have one who could occasionally help her in such little difficulties.

She spoke nearly as often to Nelly as to the Misses Johnstone during the rest of the evening, and dismissed her to her bedroom, with an embrace which was almost affectionate.

But neither the cordiality nor the kiss had any power to comfort Nelly when she found herself once more alone. The excitement was over then, the novelty was fast dying away: even the presence of the officious Pinner had been withdrawn; and there was nothing left in the middle of that big, luxurious bedroom, but an apparently heart-broken girl, crying for her home and the friends with whom she had lived from her infancy. She told herself it was foolish, and weak, and wrong; she knelt down and repeated her innocent prayers, and prayed to be made contented and grateful; still the tears would rise as she pictured her darling Bertie toiling up the cottage staircase with no one to help him but old Aggie, of his going to bed without any one to read or talk to him, and falling to sleep (if he *could* sleep, so Nelly silently argued) without his sister’s good-night kiss. She imagined every contingency that could possibly occur during her absence from her home; of how her grandfather or old Aggie might be found dead in their beds; or Bertie—even Bertie—but no, that thought

was too dreadful even for a surmise, and Nelly shuddered at, but could not entertain it. So that, whilst her grandfather and old Aggie were making "night hideous" with their snores, and Bertie, under the influence of a stronger potation than usual, which he had taken advantage of his sister's absence to procure, was also buried in a deep slumber, poor little Nelly was crying herself to sleep from a sheer sense of loneliness and fatigue, and repeating again and again, with an attempt at self-comfort, "For *your* sake, Bertie ! it is for *your* sake, darling. I will remember that it is for *your* sake, and try to be contented."

She was sounding the key-note of her life.

CHAPTER X.

MRS BROOKE CHANGES HER OPINION.

WHEN Nelly entered the breakfast-room on the following morning, and found that her Cousin Nigel had taken his breakfast an hour before, and was gone out shooting for the day, she thought him almost unkind. He knew that he was the only person at Orpington with whom she felt at all at her ease, and he had promised if she would go and stay there, that he would be a friend to her. And this was what he called being a "friend," leaving her the very first day all by herself with her Aunt Eliza, who did not make her appearance until it was nearly noon, and whose whole attention from that time appeared to be occupied with receiving her visitors, and trying to decide how she should have her next dresses made and trimmed.

But Nigel Brooke was neither unkind nor unwise in pursuing the course which he had chosen. He was very anxious that his mother should take a fancy to his Cousin Nelly ; and he was aware that Mrs Brooke was a woman of most capricious temper, who conceived violent likes and dislikes without any visible cause for the people with whom she was thrown in contact, and he knew that the less interest he appeared to take in his cousin, and the less anxiety he betrayed that she should make a favourable impression at the Chase, the more likely was her aunt to be gracious to her. So he took especial care to absent himself from home for the first few days after her arrival, and leave her to make her way alone, and on the fourth day he was rewarded for his circumspection by Mrs Brooke waylaying him in his private room of her own accord, to make the following disclosure :—

"My dear Nigel, that little cousin of yours is a perfect genius. I had no idea when I first saw her what a deal of cleverness was concealed beneath all that shyness. How could I have guessed it, you know? But she can do *everything*. Why, yesterday morning, when that stupid maid of mine, Prout, was fussing and fuming over the fit of my new black velvet jacket, pulling it first this way and then the other; and I am sure the amount of stuff that woman must have wasted in the cutting out alone, no one could calculate; I'm sure, Nigel, short a time as I have been in England, I have often and often regretted the tailors in Calcutta, for they never"—

"Yes, yes, mother," impatiently interposed her son, "but never mind the Calcutta tailors now; finish your story about Prout."

"Well, let me see, where was I? Oh yes! to be sure—well—in comes your cousin to ask me a question; and positively she saw what was wrong in a minute. I was just saying to Prout, 'It will never come right, Prout; perhaps you'd better cut out another,' when 'Oh! yes it will, aunt,' says Helena, 'if you will let me make a little alteration here; it only wants sloping at the shoulders;' and she took the scissors out of Prout's hand, unripped both the seams, took in quite half an inch under the arms, sloped the shoulder, and there was the jacket, fitting as nicely as possible. 'And now, Prout,' she said, 'you have only got to cut it down more in the throat, and I think you will find it come right.' You should have seen Prout's face, Nigel. I was so pleased, because the creature's last place was with a countess, and whenever I find fault with her, she tells me how she gave her ladyship entire satisfaction. Well, I have not finished about your cousin's cleverness yet. In the afternoon we drove to Hilstone, and I bought some macaroons. You may remember how fond I used to be of macaroons in Calcutta. I was telling Helena all about them, and how I should never get any in England to taste like those they used to have made at the mess of the 110th; these confectioners' macaroons seem always so dry and hard; never imagining that the child would remember it, and what do you think? This morning at luncheon time, cook sent up some made *just* as I like them, so soft and sticky, that I had to wash my hands directly after eating them, and I should be almost ashamed to tell you how many I did eat. Of course I was delighted, and sent at once to know where she had got the recipe; when your cousin told me that *she*—that chit, Nigel! only fancy! who has never been out of Bickton (or whatever they call the place) in her life

before—*she* had written it out and sent it down by Pinner yesterday evening, with a request that the cook would try it and see how I liked it. Oh ! I was perfectly enchanted with the girl ! Such thought, my dear, such prudence ! there are very few girls nowadays who know what a macaroon is made of ; but Helena tells me that she always makes the pastry at home, and has tried her hand at all kinds of recipes. Why didn't you tell me she could do all this before, Nigel ? I had no idea it was *this* kind of girl you wished me to invite to the Chase ; but I really don't think you men know or care what a woman can do ; it is all frippery, and finery, and outside show with you, and if a girl has not a pretty face, you ask no further about her. And poor Helena is certainly not *pretty* ; that is to say, she has fine eyes and hair of course, but no style, which is everything after all. But we can't be perfect in this world, that is positive ! ”

Perhaps Nigel Brooke was not entirely of his mother's opinion respecting the amount of beauty possessed by his cousin, but he ventured no remark upon the subject. She had been running on so fast and continuously in her new-born enthusiasm for Nelly's merits in the dress-making and cooking departments, that she had given her son no opportunity either to second or refute her assertions ; and he would probably have chosen to remain silent if she had.

He saw that the spell was working, and was satisfied to maintain neutral ground until his mother's sudden fancy for his cousin should have developed into something steadier and stronger. So he only smiled, and said—

“ I am very glad indeed to hear that you are likely to find Nelly an agreeable companion, mother : for I do not think any kindness you may show her will be thrown away. ”

“ Agreeable, my dear Nigel ! she is positively charming, and if she goes on at this rate, I'm sure I don't know what I shall do when she leaves the Chase. I have been worrying myself about it all this morning, and I was thinking just now, how delightful it would be to have her to live with me altogether. You are sure to marry, you know, Nigel, before you return to Calcutta ; in fact, you *must* marry, you should look upon it as a sacred duty, and though I am sure your wife will be everything that is desirable for the station she will fill : beautiful and accomplished and of high birth, and so on ; yet she can never be to me what a girl of *this* sort could be ; it would not be suitable that she should, and even if she were, you will soon be off to Calcutta again and take her

with you. And in that case I feel I should like to have Helena to live with me and be my companion, you know. There she would be; always ready to look after my things, or to accompany me anywhere : to take all trouble off my hands, in fact; so that when I have considered about it a little longer, and seen a little more of the girl's abilities, I shall just tell her of my plan. It would be *rather* a change for her, Nigel ! would it not, to leave Bickton for good and take up her abode with me ? Poor dear child !" and she looked at her son, evidently expecting him to endorse her sentiments, and approve of them.

But Nigel Brooke was silent. He had winced terribly under this last proposal of his mother's, and when she had alluded to the chance of his marriage, and spoken of Nelly as a girl of *this sort*, he had felt as though some one had suddenly run a knife into his flesh. The thought of this contented, home-loving, and free child of the country being pent up for life as the companion of his frivolous mother, would have struck him with dismay, had he not known that it could never be. But he was anxious not to turn all Mrs Brooke's sympathies in the other direction, by opposing her cherished plan. So after a pause he replied—

"I daresay such a companion, if she proved all that you imagine, mother, would be a great comfort to you; but you must remember that Nelly is very young, and that as yet you have seen but little of her."

"Ah ! that is just the way with you men, Nigel ; you are one as suspicious as the other ; however, I do not choose to share your doubts about your poor little cousin. I am sure that she would prove all that I could desire."

"But she has her grandfather and brother to look after at home, remember ! What would they do without her ?"

"Oh ! if it were absolutely necessary, I might manage to wait until the old man is dead : he can't live very much longer, surely ! and as for the cripple, couldn't we get him put into an asylum, or somewhere ? I am sure it might be managed."

At the idea of Robert Brooke quietly consenting to be packed away in an asylum for incurables, in order that his sister might become companion to her aunt, Nigel laughed outright ; but he only begged his mother not to mention such a thing to her niece.

"Nelly scarcely believes that her brother is incurable," he said, "and the twins are very much attached to one another, so pray do not hint at such an idea as an asylum for him. When my grandfather dies, I have no doubt that we shall be able to make

arrangements for my cousins to leave Little Bickton, and take up their abode near us; but meanwhile, mother, you leave me out of the question altogether. You are determined that I shall marry, or be got rid of in some way."

"Because you are *sure* to marry, my dear," she replied.

"Perhaps I should be, if it depended wholly on my own wishes; but how are you to control those of the beautiful and accomplished young ladies from amongst whom I am to choose a wife? Such a girl as you desire to have for a daughter-in-law may prefer somebody better for a husband than a middle-aged Calcutta merchant."

"What nonsense it is of you, Nigel, to talk in that manner! *Middle age*! why, you are hardly in your prime yet."

"What, with gray hairs in my head?" he asked, with a laugh.

"Gray hairs are nothing—all the young people have gray hairs nowadays, and particularly such as have lived for any time in India. You are only just thirty-five, and you have an income which will justify you in picking and choosing as you will."

"Yes! if I wanted to *buy* a wife—but I don't; I would rather *win* one."

"And you would find no difficulty in that either, Nigel. A handsome, sensible woman, such as *I* trust you would choose, one not too young, and who knows what the world is, would be the very first to appreciate the advantages of a marriage with a man like yourself, who is able not only to make a place for her in society, but to keep it."

"Yes! that all sounds very easy," said Nigel Brooke; "but, unfortunately, mother, it too often happens in marriage that what would be most suitable for a man is not most pleasing; we old fellows on the road to forty are apt to attach as much, if not more, charm to the innocence and simplicity of very young girls than we did at twenty; and as the fancies of extreme youth do not generally correspond with ours, we are also apt to have our honourable proposals rejected to our faces, which makes us vow never to try our luck again. So I think there is just as much chance of your having *me* for a companion for life as Miss Helena Brooke; and I think I am entitled by birth (not to mention several minor considerations) to the first preference."

He spoke so playfully, that his mother answered him in the same strain, and told him he was a great goose, and it was of no use to argue with him. And then she turned the conversation back again to Nelly.

"But now *do* tell me, Nigel—what shall I buy for her? I want

to make her a nice present. I have given her two of my evening dresses and the brown silk which Prout spoilt in the making the week before last, and that pair of carved bracelets which your poor father sent for from China for me—(I never cared for them, you know, they are so unbecoming); but I want now to get her something *really useful* from Hilstone. What do you think she would like best?"

"Don't you think you have given her sufficient for one day?" he answered, quietly. "Nelly is not used, I fancy, to receiving many presents."

He could not bear the idea of his mother having given her dresses which had been worn for however short a time, and dreaded lest the girl's pride should be hurt by such an offering. But Mrs Brooke was in one of her "giving" humours, and would not be reasoned or persuaded out of a tithe of her intended generosity.

"Dear me, no! They were nothing—mere trifles—I want to give the child something much better—something that shall be really serviceable. Now, Nigel, don't be disagreeable, but tell me just what you imagine she would prefer."

He was pleased with the marked change in his mother's sentiments concerning his orphan cousin, and although he knew by long experience that her fancies were as fickle as the wind, he saw no good to be attained in the future by checking her kind intentions in the present. And so he considered for a moment, and then said—

"If you are determined upon loading Nelly with benefits, mother, I think a riding-habit and hat would be the means of affording her the greatest pleasure during her visit to us; for I know that she can ride, and I could easily have a side-saddle put on the little gray, and take her out sometimes with me. There is to be a grand coursing match on the downs on Friday week, and the meet will be a very gay scene."

If he had proposed that his cousin should take lessons on the tight-rope, Mrs Brooke would have acquiesced in his desire. She was just in the humour to grant him or Nelly anything.

"Of course, my dear boy, that will be just the thing, and some gloves besides—and a neat little riding-whip. I will order her a complete riding outfit the very next time we go into Hilstone. Indeed, I see no reason that we should not do so this very afternoon. It is not four yet, and we shall be back in plenty of time for dinner. Ring the bell, my dear, and order the carriage at once. I will go and find your cousin, and desire her to get ready to accompany us." And accordingly Mrs Brooke did search out Nelly, and take her

off to Hilstone there and then, and have her measure taken for the most expensive riding-habit that the town could furnish.

To say that Nelly was indifferent to the pretty things which her aunt now showered upon her, would be to paint her as an immaculate creature, which she was very far from being. She greatly admired the Chinese bracelets which Mrs Brooke thought so unbecoming ; she was in raptures about the new riding habit and hat, and could scarcely believe that they were really to be hers ; and her pride even was not offended by being asked to accept the three dresses which had been her aunt's—though in the latter case, perhaps, the difference of age and the close relationship which existed between the donor and receiver, served to cover any little feeling of annoyance which might otherwise have arisen at such an offer.

But although she valued the gifts, and still more the kindness which prompted their bestowal, Nelly was not happy at the Chase. She appeared more cheerful and like herself as the days went on, but it was because they were going on, and each one brought the hour of her return to Little Bickton nearer. Although never formally agreed upon, it seemed to be tacitly understood by all parties that the term of her visit was to be a month, and when nearly half of that time had elapsed and her Cousin Nigel ventured to rally her upon the improvement in her spirits, and the falseness of her prophecies with respect to her certain misery at the Chase, she disappointed him greatly by the open confession that she couldn't help feeling happier now because she should so soon see Bertie again. Indeed, whatever they did to please or amuse her, she appeared to Nigel visibly to pine after her brother. She wrote to him every day : she alluded to him in almost every other sentence ; she never seemed to be able to keep her thoughts away from her home for more than a few minutes at a time ; and it was sufficient to mention the name of Little Bickton to be certain of at once enchaining her attention.

And the cheerfulness which she managed to maintain was chiefly owing to the letters which she constantly received from her brother, and in which he never failed to urge her to do all she could to ingratiate herself with her relatives, and to pave the way for the ultimate comfort and respectability of herself and him. And so she toiled on, day after day, to make herself agreeable and necessary to her aunt, in hopes of securing his welfare, as she would have cheerfully worked in the mines or the galleys, with the same incentive.

She was quite a little slave to Mrs Brooke at this period, running her errands and unpicking her work, although the elder lady imagined she was bestowing a great benefit on the girl by employing her thus honourably ; and that all that Nelly did for her was amply repaid by the many additions she had made to her scanty wardrobe, and the amusements to which she had taken her. And Nelly herself thought nothing of the little attentions which she rendered ; for she had been used to sacrifice herself for the good of others, and cherished some very old-fashioned notions respecting the duties of relationship.

Yet her aunt never gave her any present but she questioned whether Bertie would admire or care to possess it before she decided to keep it for herself, and Mrs Brooke never lavished caresses or praises upon her niece, without Nelly reminding her that her twin brother was far better worth loving, and far better worth praising than herself.

And so vehement was Mrs Brooke's short-lived admiration, that she was almost prepared, during its continuance, to believe, as well as to affirm, that she was as ready to love Bertie as she was his sister.

CHAPTER XI.

NELLY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THE new riding-habit and hat were ready some days before they were required, and Nigel Brooke having had a side-saddle fitted to the little gray, found that a few hints as to the most approved method of mounting, and holding her reins, were all that was required to transform his Cousin Nelly into a first-rate horsewoman, for she already possessed the two great requisites to that end, namely, courage and a firm seat ; and from the time that her paraphernalia was complete, she accompanied him daily in his rides.

The day of the coursing match, to be held on the downs, rose gloriously, and a gayer assemblage than Nelly had ever been introduced to before met her view, as, mounted on the little gray, and escorted by her cousin, she arrived upon the scene of action. All the private carriages which Hilstone could boast (Mrs Brooke's amongst the number) were drawn up on either side of the starting-point, whilst equestrians of all sorts, from the burly squire, followed by a train of boys and girls mounted on rough

ponies, and the farmer astride his clumsy cob, to all the gentlemen of the Hunt, accompanied by their wives and daughters, and most of the officers from Hilstone Barracks, were scattered here and there in groups upon the downs.

The tenant of Orpington Chase, although he had not been amongst them for more than two months, was already well known, and as he conducted his cousin to the spot from which she could best watch the running of the greyhounds, greetings assailed him from every side. The eye-glasses of the Hilstone ladies were in great request as Nelly, her face glowing with exercise and excitement, rode past their carriage windows ; and the surmises which broke from them relative to the exact connexion which existed between Mr Brooke and the young lady to whom he seemed to be paying so much attention, were as various as the criticisms which they passed upon her personal appearance.

There was no less curiosity manifested amongst Nigel's male acquaintance with regard to the name and residence of the attractive-looking stranger ; but the more they gazed after Nelly, and whispered to one another concerning her, the more pleasure did her cousin appear to take in refusing to gratify them, and he guided her in silence through the groups of horsemen, and the battery of the ladies' glances, until he brought both their steeds to a stand-still beside his mother's carriage. There he would have passed on, if he could, but Mrs Brooke had already caught sight of them, and addressed her son by name. She was reclining, a mass of feathers and flowers, on the luxurious cushion of her chariot, flirting, or making believe to flirt, after the fashion of some old ladies, with a good-looking man, who was resting both his arms on the sill of the open window, and talking to her in an easy and confidential manner. As he perceived who was his mother's companion, Nigel Brooke's brow contracted, although there was nothing in the gentleman's appearance to justify such an action ; on the contrary, with respect to looks, he was gifted rather above than below the average, being a handsome man of the middle height, with a graceful figure, dark eyes and hair, and large well-kept whiskers. As soon as Mrs Brooke ejaculated her son's name, he rose from the lounging attitude he had assumed, and stood upright, and the next minute she had introduced him to her niece.

"My niece, doctor, Miss Brooke : Nelly, my dear, Dr Monkton, of Hilstone. Nigel, Dr Monkton and I have come to the conclusion that we were very foolish not to bring some 'tiffin'

with us on to the downs, for if they don't begin the coursing soon, we shall be compelled to go without one or the other."

"The fresh air of so elevated a spot is calculated to provoke a keener appetite than usual!" said Dr Monkton, addressing himself to Nelly. On being introduced to her, he had left the side of her aunt's carriage, and approached her horse, and as he spoke, he laid his hand upon the animal's neck in a manner which struck Nigel Brooke as being far too familiar on so short an acquaintance.

"Yes!" said the girl, shyly.

"You are new to Orpington, Miss Brooke, are you not?"

"Yes!" she replied again, and nothing more.

She had not liked the ordeal of glances through which she had already passed; for she was unaccustomed to admiration, and was too apt to imagine that people only looked at her because she was awkward, or countrified, or in some manner differed from themselves. But that had been nothing to what her bashfulness now suffered as Mrs Brooke's friend fixed his large dark eyes upon her face, and kept them there.

"Are you likely to make a long stay?" he inquired.

"No! I am soon going home again!"

"Have you yet visited Hilstone?"

"Yes; with my aunt."

"But I mean, have you inspected its historical relics and antiquities. Perhaps you know they are very numerous. There is the cathedral, full of the bones of early Saxon kings; and the college, founded by the famous Bishop Thomas of Tallow-wick, and the fortified gates, which were held during a siege of several months. You will not think of leaving Orpington, I hope, without paying a visit to spots which possess so much interest."

"No!" said Nelly, mechanically.

She had never felt so stupid or so unable to converse with any stranger before, for the whole time he had been speaking of the kings' bones and Thomas of Tallow-wick, Dr Monkton had not once removed his admiring gaze from her features. She had twisted on her saddle, and looked down on the ground, and up into the clear blue autumn sky, but the knowledge that those piercing eyes were still occupied in scrutinising her, made the colour in her face become deeper every moment, until her cheeks were burning. Nigel Brooke, who had also been attentively watching his cousin, noticed her confusion, and approaching her in the rear, managed, with great dexterity, to tickle, unperceived,

the flanks of the little gray, which caused it immediately to step about, to the imminent danger of the doctor's toes.

"Excuse me, Dr Monkton," he said, coldly, "but you are fidgeting my cousin's horse by coming so near. He does not always display the best of tempers when he is touched by a stranger. I think, to prevent accidents, that I had better stand between you!" and, suiting the action to the word, he brought his chestnut alongside of the little gray.

Dr Monkton may or may not have understood the hint which had thus been given him, but Mrs Brooke took her son's word all in good faith.

"Oh! my dear Nigel," she exclaimed in a voice of alarm, "I hope there is no chance of Nelly's horse becoming restive. Look there, now: the dogs are just off, and everybody is pressing to one point. Suppose the gray should get fidgety at being kept standing, and begin to kick or anything—so close to the carriage, too—I should be terribly frightened, I am sure I should scream—and then dear Nelly might be thrown!"

Nelly smiled at the very uncertain prospect which her aunt's fears had conjured up, and was about to expostulate with her concerning it; but her Cousin Nigel at once took advantage of the supposition—in order to get her away from the proximity of Dr Monkton.

"Well, so she might, mother; and I think we had better move on a little, and come back to you by and by. What do you say, Nelly?"

Nelly was quite agreeable; for the idea of moving on was as grateful to her as to himself; and so they soon left the carriage behind them, and were cantering along the short turf of the downs together.

"Such a sweet girl, doctor!" exclaimed Mrs Brooke, as that gentleman resumed his original position at the window; "very simple and timid, and unaccustomed to society, you see, but still such a sweet girl."

"I am sure of it!" said Dr Monkton, fervently; "your niece, I believe you said?"

"Yes!—well, that is, my niece by marriage, but such little distinctions make no difference to me. She is a charming creature—so clever—you can have no idea of the cleverness of that girl—and very much attached to me—very grateful, I may say;" and Mrs Brooke simpered behind her handkerchief as if the benefits wherewith she had loaded Nelly were indeed subjects for gratitude.

"Miss Brooke does not live with you?" said Dr Monkton, inquiringly.

"Well, not at present," replied the lady, with an air of mystery; "but there is little doubt that she *will* do so; when I am alone again, you know: when my son is—married."

"Is Mr Brooke's marriage then a settled thing?" said Dr Monkton, with a look of interest proper to the occasion; "may I be allowed to offer my congratulations?"

"Oh no, doctor!" exclaimed Mrs Brooke, flapping her handkerchief at him in playful reproach, "you gentlemen run on much too fast. It is not by any means a settled thing yet, but I think we may confidently say that it *will be*."

"And then Miss Brooke will live with yourself? She will be a charming companion, I am sure, and have a charming home."

Mrs Brooke sighed, and tried to look interesting and benevolent. "Of course there will be great advantages for the dear child, in such an arrangement, but we do not intend even to guess which of us will have most reason to rejoice at the change—we shall be like mother and daughter, and that is all."

"Or like sisters, you should rather say," exclaimed the doctor, gallantly; "I think there are very few people who would not be only too happy under the circumstances, to exchange places with Miss Brooke."

Meanwhile the cousins were talking together in a very different style.

"Nelly, do you like that man?" Nigel asked abruptly, as soon as they were out of hearing of his mother and Dr Monkton.

"What, that gentleman who is with aunt?"

"Yes."

"How could I like him, cousin, when I only saw him for a minute?" she asked, with surprise.

"But his appearance, his way of talking?"

"I hardly noticed either; but I don't think I quite like him altogether."

"Do you think you could come to like him?"

"No," she said, blushing.

"Do you want to see him again, Nelly?"

At this question she laughed outright. "Oh, not at all, Cousin Nigel; I was so glad when you asked me to come away."

"And so was I, when you consented. The fact is, right or wrong, I hate that fellow, and I think he knows it."

"Who is he?"

"One of the Hilstone doctors," replied her cousin. "My mother *must* have a doctor wherever she goes; she is never happy unless she has a finger-ache or a tooth-ache, and some one to walk in every afternoon and ask her how it is going on. She would not let me settle to take the Chase until she had been introduced to all the doctors in Hilstone, and found if there was one to suit her. And Dr Monkton is just the sort of man she likes. He knows how to flatter her, and will swallow any amount of flattery in return; so they spend their time in mutually complimenting each other."

"Is he clever?" asked Nelly.

"I suppose he is, or he would not be an M.D. so soon. I know the Hilstone people think a great deal of him, and he thinks a great deal of himself; but I am glad to say I have had no occasion for his services. Look, Nelly. There is the second couple of dogs off. Lord Ribstone's 'Zephyr,' and Mr Brown's 'Fly.' What splendid runners! They are neck and neck. We must have a pair of gloves on these. Which will you bet on?"

But Nelly had no pleasure in the sight before her. There was no affectation in the feeling which made her turn her eyes the other way, and refuse to watch the poor hare as it doubled again and again to evade its pursuers, and made frantic leaps in the air in its wild endeavours to escape the doom before it. It was not affectation which caused her to close her eyes and bite her lips to prevent an exclamation of horror bursting from them, as the shrill scream of the captured animal, so like that of an infant, rung upon the air; and the sigh of relief with which she welcomed the announcement that it was all over, was pure and genuine as herself. Nigel Brooke could not fail to remark that, from a burning red, his cousin's cheeks had turned quite pale; and he asked her if watching the sport was unpleasant to her, and if she would rather go home.

"Oh! would you take me?" she said, quietly. "Are you *sure* you would not mind it, Cousin Nigel, and that you won't think me very foolish; but to tell the truth, it makes me feel quite sick."

He looked at her as she spoke, with as much admiration as Dr Monkton had done, but there was nothing in the gaze of his calm, gray eyes to call an extra blush into her face.

"We will go at once, Nelly," he replied; "I am glad you don't like to watch it; I should have thought less of your kindness of heart if you had. I hardly know what I was about to bring you here."

And they turned their horses' heads towards the spot where

they had left Mrs Brooke's carriage, with the intention of telling her they were about to leave the downs. But before they reached it, they were met by Dr Monkton, who was mounted on his own steed, a showy hunter. As he approached Nelly Brooke, he raised his hat to her.

"Pardon me, Miss Brooke, but I am commissioned by your aunt to tell you that she has already returned home. She found the air so cold, and the time between the matches so prolonged, that she became tired of waiting. She hoped that you and Mr Brooke would join her at luncheon."

Nelly made no answer to this address, but looked at her Cousin Nigel.

"Thank you," he said, curtly, "we will do so."

"Are you returning to the Chase now?" continued Dr Monkton, still looking at the young lady.

"I believe so," she replied.

"Then, perhaps, you will allow me the pleasure of riding by your side so far," he said, turning his horse's head, and bringing it alongside of the little gray.

She blushed, and half bowed acquiescence, for she scarcely knew what else to do, although she felt that the proposal was not calculated to please her cousin.

Nigel Brooke reined up his chestnut fiercely on the other side, as though questioning the doctor's right to accompany them; but as he could think of no possible objection to the arrangement, he could only show his disapprobation by his silence.

Thus, the conversation on the way was not a lively one, as Nigel took no part in it, and Nelly's answers were chiefly monosyllabic; and as soon as the gates of the Chase came in view, Dr Monkton, again raising his hat, galloped off in the direction of Hilstone.

The cousins found Mrs Brooke rather tired and rather cross from having waited too long for her luncheon, for she was a lady who was easily put out, if anything went wrong in the gastronomic arrangements; so Nigel walked off again as soon as the meal was over, and did not make his reappearance until the dinner was on the table.

The next afternoon they were all three walking abreast in the garden, when he thus addressed his cousin—

"Nelly, did you not have a letter from your brother this morning?"

"Yes," she replied, with a sudden glow which always rose to

her face at the mention of her brother. "Yes, Cousin Nigel, and he says grandpapa has not been so well as usual lately, and that if he does not get better soon, he would wish me to return home." And the girl smiled at the anticipation, even whilst she sighed for the cause. Nigel looked grave.

"I am sorry for that," he said, "but it is probably only the change in the season which has affected him. Old people generally feel the setting-in of autumn and spring."

"Oh! my dear, it is most likely nothing at all," exclaimed her aunt. "Don't think twice about it—just an old man's fid-fads; we are not going to lose you any the sooner for that, I can tell you."

Here Nigel interposed, as though to cover the heartlessness of his mother's speech.

"Why I mentioned Robert, Nelly, was, because I wish to make him a present, and to consult you about it. What should you say to a Bath chair, in which he might easily be wheeled about. Would it not enable him to take a great deal more exercise in the open air?"

How the girl's eyes sparkled at the mere idea.

"Oh, cousin! it would be just the thing; it is the very thing we have always longed for. I could wheel Bertie out in it, could I not? He would be able to go with me in all my walks. I could wheel him up to the Farm, or to the vicar's. You don't know how strong I am. Oh, cousin!" and in her gratitude and pleasure, Nelly seized the hand of Nigel Brooke in both her own, and then dropped it as if it had been a hot stone, as the impropriety of the proceeding broke upon her mind.

Mrs Brooke could not see the girl's delight without some degree of interest; but she thought a present that was to cost forty or fifty guineas was rather too lavish to be expended upon a place like Little Bickton.

"You to wheel a gentleman about out of doors, my dear?" she said to Nelly with well acted surprise. "I am afraid that is scarcely the occupation for a young lady. Has your brother never tried walking on crutches? I should have thought a nice pair of crutches, Nigel, the best thing to send to your poor cousin."

Nelly's brief enchantment seemed to be dissolving.

"Bertie is so—so—sensitive," she said timidly. "I could hardly explain to you what he feels about himself—but he has always had such a horror of walking about on crutches."

"A horror! my dear?—well, I call that sinful in any one who

has not been blessed with the use of his legs. However, here comes the doctor ! and we'll just ask him what he thinks about it."

And to the disgust of Nigel—and the dismay of poor little Nelly, who greatly disliked having her brother's affliction spoken of before strangers—Dr Monkton was really to be seen advancing to meet them on the gravel path.

"Doctor, you have just come in time," exclaimed Mrs Brooke, as he saluted the party ; "though what made you guess we should want you this afternoon I can't think."

"Sympathy, my dear Mrs Brooke, sympathy," replied the handsome doctor, showing all his teeth ; "but for whom may I be required—not for yourself, I am sure ; nor for Miss Brooke, if I may judge from her bloom ?" bowing towards Nelly as he spoke.

"Now be quiet, you naughty man," said the lady of the house, with infantine vivacity ; "you are here not to pay compliments, but to give us your advice ; my niece, here, has a brother, a twin brother, who is greatly afflicted—deformed in fact"—

"Aunt," said Nelly, imploringly.

"Well, my dear child, it is the case ; and my son wishes—very properly I am sure—to make his poor cousin some sort of a present, a remembrance ! didn't you say so, Nigel ?"

"Have it your own way, mother," he said, carelessly, but with a look of intense annoyance.

"But we differ slightly as to the species of offering which would be most acceptable—most useful I should rather say—to a cripple. Nigel proposes a wheel chair—but in my opinion, as he has no one to push him about in it, a good pair of crutches would set the young gentleman more at liberty. They make crutches so beautifully now, doctor, don't they ?"

"But my brother is not a cripple," said Nelly, boldly, although she felt very much inclined to cry ; "he can walk about alone, though not for any distance, and I am afraid he would not use crutches."

"But they would enable him to walk far," persisted Mrs Brooke.

"There was a man, I remember, who"—

"May I inquire the nature of your brother's complaint ?" said the doctor, interrupting Mrs Brooke without any ceremony, and addressing himself to Nelly.

"He was born so," she began in a very low voice ; "we are twins ; and he was born a weakly baby, and I a strong one. He could not sit upright until he was four or five years old—and he has laid on the sofa half his life since then. His back is very

weak, and so is his health altogether, but he is *not* deformed—no more than I am,” she concluded, indignantly.

“A spinal complaint, I presume? Is there no curvature?” inquired Dr Monkton, with increased interest.

“I suppose there is, but he stoops, so we can hardly tell. If he tries to hold himself upright it hurts him.”

“From what Miss Brooke tells you,” now interposed Nigel, “you may suppose that an easy Bath chair would be the most appropriate conveyance for my cousin. He has not as yet possessed one, and in consequence, has taken very little out-door exercise.”

“I should think you could scarcely choose anything more useful,” replied the doctor; “but perhaps you know that there are several varieties of invalid chairs, some are made expressly for”——

“What, doctor! and don’t you approve of crutches then?” came as a last appeal from Mrs Brooke; but he went on with his sentence.

“Some are made expressly for the convenience of persons suffering from the weakness under which, I conjecture, from the account Miss Brooke has favoured me with, her brother labours. It would be a pity, if you decide upon purchasing such an article, that you should not procure the best and easiest of its kind. There are several hand-carriages of the sort you require, now in use at Hilstone, most of which I have myself chosen for my patients, and I shall be most happy to show them to you whenever you like to come over for that purpose.”

“You are very obliging,” replied Nigel Brooke, who did not like to receive coldly an offer which was apparently made in good faith.

“Why should you not all drive over together?” continued Dr Monkton, turning to Mrs Brooke. “If you and Miss Brooke will only consent to overlook the discrepancies of a bachelor’s establishment, and to take luncheon at my house, I shall be charmed to entertain you there.”

At this, Mrs Brooke, who had been rather hurt at her favourite’s disregard of her opinions, plucked up her spirits again, and readily agreed to the proposal.

“Why not, indeed! I think it would be delightful, and can answer for Nelly, as well as myself; only you can never call yours a bachelor establishment, doctor, whilst you have your good sister to live with you and look after you.”

Dr Monkton bowed.

“But just at present,” he said, “my sister happens to be away, and therefore it will really be the meal of an anchorite to which

I must invite you. What day may I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you?"

"Will the day after to-morrow suit you?" asked Mrs Brooke, quite eager for the promised visit.

"Any one day which suits yourself," he said. "Therefore we may consider that a settled thing;" and then the conversation turned upon other subjects, and no more was said about the Bath chair, or Nelly's absent brother.

Nigel Brooke did not half like the prospect of a luncheon under Dr Monkton's roof, but he could think of no possible objection to raise against it. Nelly never gave the matter a thought after it was once settled; but she could not so easily drive that other old familiar subject out of her loving little heart.

"He is not deformed, is he?" she asked anxiously of Nigel, as soon as they found themselves alone again.

"Deformed!—who?—Bertie?—of course not!" exclaimed her cousin, starting out of a reverie; "but I say, Nelly, do you care much about going to this luncheon at Hilstone?"

CHAPTER XII.

NELLY AND NIGEL HAVE OCCASION TO "MAKE IT UP AGAIN."

BUT whether Nelly cared, or did not care, or Nigel approved, or did not approve, made no alteration in the fact that the plan of the luncheon was a settled thing, for Mrs Brooke had decided that it should be so; and when she had set her heart upon an object, she was apt to make it disagreeable for such as did not readily adopt the same views concerning it as herself.

Yet, notwithstanding that she had encountered no opposition to her wishes in the present case, she was not in her best humour on the day she had engaged that they should visit Dr Monkton at Hilstone. And the circumstance which had had the power to ruffle her temper was a very slight one. On the morning in question, she had been lavishly praising her niece, as was her wont at that period, in the apparently dull ear of her son. He had listened patiently to a lengthy tirade on Nelly's abilities and tact from his mother, wondering to himself the while how much longer her enthusiasm on the subject would last, when he was roused by Mrs Brooke giving an impatient stamp with her foot as she exclaimed—

"Really, Nigel! you are beyond all bearing. Here have I been telling you that this sweet creature is of the greatest comfort and use possible to me, and that I want you to bestir yourself and make some arrangement for her living here altogether, and you sit with your eyes on the ground as if you did not hear a word I said, and look almost as interested as if I had been speaking of a cookmaid. I really don't believe you ever give a thought to your cousin or me, or any one but yourself!"

The injustice of the accusation stung Nigel Brooke into answering with greater warmth than he would otherwise have done.

"You are quite mistaken, mother," he said quickly, "if you imagine that I am blind to Nelly's merits, or rate her virtues any lower than you do. Perhaps it were better for me if I did. But I simply think she is one of the most charming and lovable little creatures I ever came across, and that she is far too good to become a mere companion to you or any one. I hope we shall live to see her happily married, and above the necessity of earning her bread in that capacity or any other." And without waiting for an answer, Nigel Brooke had hastily left the room.

His reply had taken his mother completely by surprise. That *she* should praise her niece to him, however extravagantly, was nothing, in her own opinion, but that her son should so fully and openly acquiesce in all she said, was quite a different thing.

And she felt it the more because she could not reasonably find fault with it even to herself. She had invited, nay, urged Nigel to join her in pronouncing a verdict upon his cousin, and his ideas had merely corresponded with those which she professed to hold. He may have agreed simply from a desire to please her, and yet the remembrance of his kindling eye and energetic manner seemed to deny the supposition. She could not forget also that he had called Nelly "the most charming and lovable creature" he had ever come across, and that sentence alone was sufficient to rouse Mrs Brooke's jealous temper for the rest of the day.

So that the drive to Hilstone was not a very lively one, and Nelly feared that her aunt could not be feeling well, she was so unusually silent and undemonstrative.

Hilstone was a "city built on a hill, which could not be hid," but it was approached from Orpington on its highest side, so that Nelly had thought, when she first drove down its principal street, that it was almost as perilous a descent as that of one of her own Kentish hills. It was a very old town, with intricate

thoroughfares, and many of the upper stories of the shops and houses projected so far beyond the houses that they darkened the street and suggested the unpleasant idea to a stranger that they were about to tumble over. Sometimes the pavements were so narrow that two persons could not walk abreast on them, and more than once the carriage left daylight behind it altogether as it passed through an archway formed by connected buildings.

Nigel spoke to his cousin of everything they passed which he thought might interest her, because his mother lay back on the other side of the carriage with her eyes shut, and refused to make any remark of her own accord. But soon after they had entered the town, they turned into the street in which Dr Monkton lived. All the streets in Hilstone were named after old saints, and this one was called St Bartholomew's. It was so narrow that two vehicles meeting there could not have passed each other; and when, after skirting a dead wall, the carriage finally stopped before the front of a tall red-brick house, which stood on the pavement, and had all its windows closed with shutters, Nelly thought that she had never seen a dwelling before which looked so cheerless and uninviting. But the outside of Dr Monkton's house was only a proof of the old saying, that "appearances are deceitful." As soon as the wheels were heard to stop, the door with its quaint knocker and handle was thrown open, and there stood their host, bowing and smiling in a hall which for size and decorations might have vied with that of the Chase.

Mrs Brooke recovered her equanimity at once; she skipped down the carriage-steps and into the house like a girl, and immediately fell into raptures with everything she saw there. As soon as Nelly, followed by her cousin, had joined her aunt, Dr Monkton led them through the hall into the dining-room, where luncheon was already spread, and which opened with glass doors on to the lawn of a garden such as is seldom seen in the midst of any town but a cathedral one. A grassy lawn, bright, smooth, and even as it could be, surrounded by a wall of fifteen or sixteen feet in height and completely covered with ivy. Three or four ancient walnut and mulberry trees stood at various intervals about the grass; and everything was so solemn and so still, the place seemed so shut in from the outside bustle of traffic, that the few gay geraniums and other flowers which brightened it appeared almost out of place, like knots of coloured ribbon on the serge dress of a nun.

"It is like a church," said Nelly, as she stepped outside the

dining-room window and stood on the gravelled terrace, and listened to the cawing of the rooks in the cathedral yard; "it is all so quiet—it almost makes me hold my breath: I feel as if I were in the garden of a cloister."

"And so you are, Miss Brooke," exclaimed the doctor, who had heard the remark, "or rather, in what was so! My place was not exactly a nunnery, but it was a sort of dower-house for the aged and infirm nuns who had become past their work."

"What a number of them must have died here," said Nelly, "I should always fancy I saw their ghosts flitting about in the moonlight."

"What absurd nonsense you do talk, child!" said Mrs Brooke, testily. "I am sure there is nothing about Dr Monkton's house to remind one of anything so unpleasant. You quite give me the shivers with your fancies."

"Let us go into the dining-room, my dear madam," interposed the doctor, gaily, "and see if luncheon cannot dispel them. Miss Brooke is not the only person who has pronounced my house gloomy on a first acquaintance; but I cannot permit it to be thought so to-day, at any rate. It is a festival for a lonely bachelor when two such ladies as yourselves condescend to grace my humble board;" and conducting his guests to the table, he set them down to a capital repast, at which they were waited upon by two men-servants. Dr Monkton always chose to speak disparagingly of himself and his belongings, but in reality, he was remarkably well off, had an excellent practice, a comfortably-furnished house, and everything about him conducted in good style. The only thing required to complete his establishment was a wife; but as he was known to be on the look-out for one, it was supposed that the deficiency would before long be supplied, and meanwhile it afforded an immense deal of innocent excitement to the young ladies of Hilstone.

But although the luncheon was excellent, it did not soothe the troubled spirit of Mrs Brooke as it should have done; for as soon as the doctor was satisfied that her temporal wants had been attended to, he devoted himself to her niece, and the fact that Nelly did not seem to appreciate his attentions was no alleviation to her aunt's sense of neglect. Dr Monkton had to speak more than once before he could recall the girl's wandering thoughts to the dainties which he placed before her; her eyes were oftener fixed upon the paintings with which the walls of the room were adorned, than on the face of her host; and her mind

occupied with the luxurious couches and arm chairs which furnished it, than with the topics which he urged upon her consideration.

But before the meal was ended, Dr Monkton by chance hit upon the magnet which should hold the attention of his young guest. He was speaking of the carving of a little frame which had attracted her notice.

"It is the work," he said, "of a young man who has lost the use of his legs. By the by, Miss Brooke, has your brother a fancy for any employment of the sort?"

She turned towards him directly, and began to speak of Bertie, and what he did, and did not do, and how distasteful occupation appeared to be to him, on account of his weak health, his sister fondly surmised. The doctor took advantage of the point he had thus gained. He commenced to speak earnestly to her on the subject of her brother's affliction; told her of similar cases in which he had seen the sufferers completely restored; asked whether galvanism had yet been tried with him, or chemical baths, or several other means, by which he said that spinal disease had been arrested or cured. Nelly became excited on the subject, to her of greater interest than any other in the world; she talked faster and better than either her aunt or her cousin had heard her do before; she gave Dr Monkton every particular she could think of; her eyes danced and her cheeks grew rosy, and her mouth was wreathed with smiles, as he answered almost everything she told him with the renewed assurance that he saw no reason that her brother should not eventually be restored to health.

"Time will be needed of course," he said, "and all the more because the attempt has been delayed, but I should have no doubt myself of the ultimate issue. I wish I had him here," he added, leaning back in his chair, and slapping his hand upon his knee. "What advice has he had did you say, Miss Brooke?"

Then she repeated the name of the old village doctor, who was not bound by the parish to visit Little Bicton more than twice a week, unless he were urgently summoned, and to whom alone had the sight of poor Bertie's crooked back ever been submitted.

Dr Monkton was too politic to make any remark upon what he heard; he did not even shake his head, but he reiterated his wish to have Mr Robert Brooke under his own care, which, after all, was saying as much as he could. But this animated conversation between the doctor and Nelly did not appear to possess much interest for either Nigel Brooke or his mother. The latter fidgeted about on her chair, and coughed audibly, and leant her

elbow on the table, and looked up at the ceiling or anywhere in order to show that she was bored.

Nigel pursued a different course. He was only too eager to watch the interchange of looks which was going on between his cousin and their host; it did not bore him, but it made him angry. He chose to mistake Nelly's bright flashing eyes, and glowing cheeks, which his reason might have told him only flashed and glowed for Bertie, for the signs of an incipient flirtation,—for a flirtation with the doctor, with the man he so much disliked, and a mixed feeling of jealousy and malice made him interrupt her once, when she was describing her brother's lassitude, to say—

"I think you can hardly attribute all Robert's helplessness to his ill-health, Nelly. You should tell the doctor that he refuses to do even what he can."

"But in cases of this sort," remarked Dr Monkton, blandly, "the patient is often oppressed with a sense of such perfect incapability, that it almost amounts to the possession."

"That may be," replied Nigel Brooke; "but it is not the case with my cousin. He is able to undergo slight exertion, and he knows it, but his disposition is naturally indolent, and the best thing that could happen to him in my opinion would be to be *forced* to do things for himself. You must not believe quite all that Miss Brooke tells you of him."

Nelly looked at her cousin in surprise. Hitherto he had always spoken so kindly, so affectionately of Bertie, that she could hardly believe that the words she had heard had fallen from his lips. But there was no mistake about it. Nigel was looking more sternly at her than she had ever seen him look before, and his mother was smiling furtively as though to second his opinion.

For the first time, the little country girl dared to feel angry with them both: she turned away quickly, and re-directed her attention to her host, whilst he, perceiving that her cousin's remark had not pleased her, hastened to deny his belief in it.

"It requires a professional knowledge of such complaints, Mr Brooke, to be qualified to pass an opinion on them. No one but a medical man can be prepared to judge how far the brain and capability of action may be affected by such a weakness as Mr Robert Brooke suffers from. However, as we appear to have finished luncheon, I propose, if agreeable to all parties, that we take a little stroll round my premises, when I shall be able to show you one

or two specimens of the wheeled chairs to which you alluded during my last visit to the Chase."

He rose as he spoke, and conducted his guests into the garden, where he exhibited all his floral treasures to them, as well as the invalid carriages which they had expressly come to see. Nigel Brooke and Dr Monkton spoke further together concerning the convenience of this, or the lightness or durability of that make; but all that they said was uttered in a very business-like and formal manner, whilst Nelly and her aunt, lingering behind or beside them, never exchanged so much as a single word. The girl was brooding, not sullenly, but with deep pain, on the careless way in which her Cousin Nigel had spoken of her beloved brother; and the elder lady was reflecting on the terms her son had used concerning her niece that morning; and what he could possibly have meant by them. As soon as the gentlemen had said all they had to say to one another, Dr Monkton returned with his old assiduity to Nelly's side, and she almost welcomed him there. He was the only one who had made excuses for Bertie's foibles,—the only one who could trace his faults, as she did, to his inherent weakness. Besides, he had suggested the hope that her brother might even now be cured; and Nigel—Cousin Nigel, whom she had begun to look upon as so dear a friend, had treated the idea with indifference; had even seemed as though it were distasteful to him. Nelly's eyes grew dim with unshed tears, as this latter thought struck her mind, and brought keen dissatisfaction with it. Even then she would have gratefully returned to her old faith had her cousin showed the least sign that he regretted what he had said. But Nigel Brooke, on the contrary, held quite aloof from Nelly during the rest of the afternoon, permitting Dr Monkton to monopolise her attention, whilst the few syllables which he uttered were solely addressed to his mother, and he took an early opportunity to suggest that it was time they returned to the Chase. Mrs Brooke was not unwilling to gratify her son; she also had been disappointed of her day of pleasure, and welcomed the prospect of its close. The drive back to Orpington was even less lively than the one from it had been. The elder lady appeared still more gloomy and dissatisfied than she had been in the morning. Nigel Brooke preferred to return on the box of the carriage, and Nelly was silent and utterly miserable, though she could hardly say why. She could hardly define which of the day's incidents had so greatly disappointed her; everything had happened just as she had anticipated, and the hope which Dr Monkton had

communicated to her respecting her brother, should have raised rather than depressed her spirits. And yet she sat crouched in her corner of the carriage, only longing for the hour of bedtime, and still more for the day when she should return to Little Bickton and try to forget her visit to Orpington, and everything connected with it.

After such an afternoon, and with such companions, dinner could be nothing but a solemn ceremonial, and the quiet evening which followed it something worse. Nelly would have given anything to be able to creep away in silence to her bed, but she was still too shy to suggest anything so opposed to the ordinary routine of the Chase, so she sat still, busied with some work for her aunt, and sighing over her disappointment the while. At last, however, the legitimate hour arrived, and she rose to bid Mrs Brooke "good night." Usually the latter preceded her along the corridors, but on this occasion she presented her cheek to Nelly in ominous silence, and let her go.

Nigel was out of the room at the time, and Nelly was congratulating herself that she should escape a second formal leave-taking, when, as she placed her foot upon the upper corridor, she met him about to descend.

"Where are you going to, Nelly?" he inquired.

"Bed!" she said, laconically.

"Already! is it so late as that?" and he looked at his watch. "Just ten o'clock! well, you have lost no time—where is my mother?"

"Down-stairs in the drawing-room. Good night, Cousin Nigel!" and Nelly essayed to pass on.

"Stop a moment, Nelly. Are you in so great a hurry? Or are you ill?" as he caught a fuller view of her face.

"I am not ill, thank you; I am only tired," she replied.

"Tired; what! not with that fascinating doctor's talk, I hope? I think it would take a great deal of that to tire you, Nelly."

"You know nothing about it!"

"You appeared wonderfully pleased with it, to-day, any way."

"Did I, cousin? It is more than I was with every one's!" she answered, with a flash of spirit.

"I could have told you that—only it is not generally considered polite to neglect one's friends for a stranger."

"I was not aware that I had neglected anybody."

"You gave no one else a chance to say a word to you."

"You had a chance, cousin, and good use you made of it;

speaking against my poor Bertie." She moved on a little farther as she said this, for the tears had risen to her eyes, and she did not wish him to see them. But he followed her until she stopped before her own bedroom door.

"Nelly! don't be angry with me! I didn't mean to vex you, but the truth is, I cannot stand the impertinence of that fellow Monkton, and it drove me mad to see him monopolise you so. As for speaking against poor dear Robert, you know I am almost as anxious to serve him as you are. Make it up again, dear child—will you not? Remember what an old fellow I am, almost old enough to be your father, and don't be hard upon me!"

She was only too glad; too thankful to make it up. She had a lighted candle in one hand, but she placed the other confidently in his, and showed him a countenance which was bright as ever, under the influence of his words. At the same time, another figure had appeared at the farther end of the corridor, and stopped on perceiving them.

"You old enough to be my father, Cousin Nigel! Oh, what nonsense!"

The girlish surprise which accompanied this remark was better calculated to soothe his ruffled feelings than any tribute to his worth or intellect could have been, and as he answered it, his face became almost as radiant as her own.

"But it is true, Nelly, nevertheless—I am so much older than you are, that you must forgive me if I do not always make myself so agreeable to you as a younger fellow might do."

"I should not like you younger, Cousin Nigel!" she said, ingenuously.

"Ah! I am all very well as a guardian or an adviser, but what would you say if a man as old as I am were to ask you to be his wife, Nelly, eh?"

The words were playful, but the tone was so earnest, that it belied the words, and as he waited for her answer, his breath came short and quick.

But he waited in vain; Nelly made no reply, unless the blood which mounted to the very parting of her hair, could be taken for one.

"You would tell him to go about his business, and look out for a woman of twice your age, wouldn't you, Nelly?" he urged.

"I don't know," she said, slowly.

"Well, good night, my little cousin, then; go to bed and dream of your answer."

"Good night, Cousin Nigel!"

He took her hand again, and then the impulse seemed irresistible; he stooped down and kissed the innocent face which she had turned towards him.

It was the first kiss that any man, except her brother and grandfather, had presumed to offer her since her childhood. Nelly lingered a moment from sheer surprise, and then, without a word, darted into her room, and closed the door behind her.

Nigel Brooke just ejaculated her name, as if it were an entreaty for pardon, and then saying to himself, "God bless her!" turned to retrace his steps.

Advancing to meet him, with an air of indescribable injury, he beheld his mother!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WIND SHIFTS ROUND TO THE ORIGINAL QUARTER.

MIDWAY in the corridor they encountered one another. Mrs Brooke's spare figure was shaking with her rage, and her sallow complexion looked livid by the light which she carried. Her son at once guessed the reason of her perturbation, but he refused to appear to notice it.

"Well, Mr Brooke!" she ejaculated, with trembling lips.

"Well, Mrs Brooke!" he repeated, professing to take her words in jest, "I suppose you are going to bed?"

"I am going into my *bedroom*," she replied, sternly, "where I request you will give me a few minutes' conversation."

Nigel smiled grimly, and shrugged his shoulders, but he followed her nevertheless.

The bedroom was well lighted and warmed, and Prout, the lady's-maid, was in attendance. But Mrs Brooke dismissed her at once, with an order to wait until the bell should recall her. The woman noticed the dark look of her mistress, and the haughty bearing of her master, and departed to inform her fellow-servants that they were going to have a "row" in the house, as sure as her name was Prout. As soon as she was gone, Mrs Brooke threw herself into a chair, and cast her piercing eyes upon her son, who remained standing, leaning with one arm upon the mantelpiece.

"Pray, what is the meaning of all this?" she at length demanded, finding that Nigel would not be the first to speak.

"Of all what?" he repeated. "I have followed you here,

mother, at your own request, but you can scarcely expect me to provide the conversation as well as the company. Please to be more explicit."

His coolness irritated her.

"You know what I mean as well as I do," she said. "I wish to learn what is the meaning of the endearment which I have just seen pass between your cousin and yourself?"

"The *meaning*!" said Nigel, with a smile. "Well, I suppose the meaning is that Nelly has a sweet little face, and I kissed it. Nothing so wonderful in that, is there? We are cousins, after all; and it is rather hard upon a man if he cannot sometimes take a kiss from a pretty girl without being brought to book about it. It's what every one does who has the chance."

"But are you like 'every one' in this respect, Nigel? Tell me that," said his mother. "I have known you as long as anybody, I suppose, and it is the last thing I should have expected of you. Are you a 'kissing' man?—are you one of those who will run after any woman, be she barmaid, chambermaid, or lady, so long as she has a face which happens to coincide with your idea of what is pretty?"

"No, indeed! I hope not," replied her son, laughing. "I have never been accused of being catholic in my attachments yet, and I am afraid it is too late to begin now, even had I the wish to do so."

"Then, if such is your true opinion," rejoined Mrs Brooke, with renewed asperity; "what, I again ask, is the meaning of the kiss which I saw you give your Cousin Helena? On your own confession, such an act from you means more than it would from another man."

"You are putting very home questions, mother," replied Nigel, gravely, "and such as I should be quite justified in refusing to answer; and you are, moreover, if I mistake not, doing the worst thing you can for your cause. You are forcing me to search my heart for the solution of a question which otherwise I might have been content to leave unanswered altogether. What if, after self-examination, I should tell you that the feeling which prompted me to kiss Nelly when I wished her good night is likely to prove a stronger one than I had yet given it credit for?"

"I should say you were a fool!" exclaimed Mrs Brooke, quickly.

"Thank you," was the quiet reply.

"I should say you were mad, Nigel—idiotic—insane. It

would be the act of a madman to permit yourself to fall in love with a girl whom you can never marry."

"And why not? I am independent, I believe, and my own master!" At these words Mrs Brooke's jaw dropped, as if she had been suddenly smitten with paralysis.

"Why—should you—not marry—Helena Brooke? Good Heavens! you must be mad already to ask the question. Have you forgotten her birth, her parentage, everything connected with the misfortune of her being?"

"I have forgotten nothing—I wish I had. Not her birth, or her parentage—they are atoms in the scale; but the miserable fact, as yet unknown to her, that my father caused the death of hers."

"Atoms in the scale!" repeated Mrs Brooke, who always tried to emphasise her arguments by echoing her opponent's words. "Those are what you call 'atoms,' are they? You, who might marry anybody, who have a right to expect blood and beauty and intellect in exchange for the noble fortune your poor dear father left you! to think of throwing yourself away upon a girl from the country, uneducated, unrefined, and"—

"Hush, mother," said Nigel Brooke, firmly; "take my advice, and do not say a word of Nelly that you may have reason hereafter to repent. As to the want of formation in her character, and education in herself, I think it is not many days since I heard you affirm that her natural cleverness more than atoned for all deficiencies of that sort. Her beauty is undeniable, at all events in my eyes; and her blood is the same as my own."

"It is *not* the same as your own," commenced his mother. "I brought no taint of shame with me to"—

"I choose to consider it so," said her son, coolly interrupting her; "and could my cousin be induced to accept me for her husband, it would prove no obstacle to our marriage. But I greatly fear, that not only have her thoughts never turned in that direction, but that I am far too old to succeed in guiding them there. Nelly is a child compared to me."

"Of course she is," replied Mrs Brooke, only too glad to take up another line of reasoning; "why, she is young enough to be your daughter. You will be thirty-six on your next birthday, and she is just turned seventeen. The mere idea is preposterous!"

Nigel smiled again, almost contemptuously.

"I was thirty-five last month, mother, and Nelly was eighteen a short time previously, though it certainly makes little difference

to our argument. *I am too old for her, there is no doubt of that."*

"Seventeen years between you," said his mother, in a voice of ridicule, "a well-assorted pair truly. Why, you would be an old man, whilst she was still a young woman, with all the idlers of her acquaintance dangling after her. An enviable position to be placed in, certainly."

"I should not be afraid of that," he returned, warmly; "if Nelly accepted me of her own free will, she would be as staunch and true as myself. If perfect sincerity is not written upon her face, the world does not contain it. But I would not take the promise of any woman, unless I thought the happiness of her life depended on it, and I have no hope that I should be able to make that of so young and innocent a creature. Were I to ask her she would only refuse me, and then I should have broken up the sweet friendship which I may hope to claim from her now;" and Nigel Brooke sighed, for he had come to think, during the last half hour, that to be friends with his Cousin Nelly was not enough to satisfy him.

"Oh, dear! if you are bent upon the matter, I don't think you need in the least fear a refusal," sneered his mother, from her arm-chair. "I have no doubt Miss Helena would be ready enough to take you for the sake of your money alone, and you could scarcely expect a girl of that age to marry you for anything else. It would be a fair barter, you know; youth and (what you consider) beauty on one side, and a good establishment on the other; 'exchange is no robbery;' and I have little doubt but that her brother, and even her amiable old grandfather, who is too proud to eat a dinner at your expense, would be the first to urge her not to neglect so eligible an opportunity of settling herself. Why, the girl's fortune would be made by it; she would be a fool indeed to refuse such an offer only on account of the vast difference in your ages, when she may reasonably hope to outlive you and marry a second time. She would never be so absurd;" and Mrs Brooke leant back in her chair, and affected to laugh heartily at the mere notion of such a contingency.

Nigel bit his lips until the blood started to the surface. His mother (and she knew it well) could not have chosen a better method to turn him from his contemplated purpose, than impressing on him the idea that, in the event of Nelly accepting him as a husband, he could never feel quite sure whether she had done so for himself or for his money. He could not believe that the

reasoning which Mrs Brooke had used, held good with respect to his cousin; he could not think but that, were he so bold as to ask her if she loved him, he must be able to read the truth in her eyes—and yet—he knew that women were born actresses; that the most simple of their sex were able, on occasions, effectually to hide their feelings; and that wealth, and all the luxuries which wealth brings with it, were a great temptation to the poor. And as he remembered this, his spirit fell, and he almost wished his money bags were at the bottom of the sea.

Mrs Brooke perceived the change that was taking place in his feelings; he was viewing the prospect of such a marriage in a new light, the light she had placed before him, and she rejoiced at her success. It did seem to strike her, although the fact had not escaped the notice of her son, that, in her anxiety to prove to him the absurdity of his present wishes, she had advanced as evidence a reason exactly opposite to that which, but a few days before, she had tried to instil into his mind. Yet, in this she was not unlike many female casuists who are not, on the whole, remarkable for the perspicuity of their arguments.

“Well, my dear, I hope you are thinking better of it,” she said, more amiably, after a pause, during which Nigel had remained with his head leaning on his hand, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

“Thinking better of what?” he said, rousing himself,—“of the probability of Nelly ever growing to love me? No, I am thinking worse of it, thanks to your suggestions.”

“You will think still worse of it if you do not act upon them, Nigel,” was the reply.

“I should like to ask, in my turn,” he said, looking his mother full in the face, “what has happened to alter so entirely your opinion of my cousin. Ever since she has been under this roof, you have done little else than assail me with stories of her incredible talent, usefulness, and sweetness of disposition. Two days ago, she was, in every respect, so charming, that you were quite upset because I could not immediately write to ask my grandfather to permit her to take up her permanent abode with you; to-day, when an opportunity presents itself, by which you might legitimately keep her always by your side, you cannot find terms sufficiently strong in which to couch your disapprobation of a closer connexion with her. What does it mean? What has Nelly done? or in what respect is she different from what she was the day before yesterday? Can you answer me that?”

Mrs Brooke's faded cheeks grew quite rosy under the fixed gaze with which her son now regarded her ; she saw that she had got into a difficulty from which she could scarcely be extricated with credit to herself ; and it was unpleasant to have those searching gray eyes of Nigel's bent so scrutinisingly upon her features whilst she was thinking of a good reason to give him for the change which her sentiments had undergone. But the case was a hopeless one, and she was compelled to be contented with telling the truth.

"She has done nothing particular, that I know of, Nigel, except that I scarcely approved of the very forward manner in which she went on with the doctor this afternoon ; but that is not, perhaps, to the point. She is a very good girl in many respects, very useful and obliging, and so on ; but she is anything but what I should have expected my son to choose for a wife."

"In fact, the poor child would make a very good companion for yourself, a species of slave to fetch and carry, and be bullied whenever you had no one else to vent your temper on ; but she is not good enough, with all her clever and affectionate and guileless disposition, for me to love, and cherish, and protect from all tyranny. She would be too independent, in such a position, to please you or serve your purposes."

Mrs Brooke's quick temper could not stand the tone of sarcasm with which these words were uttered ; she fired up again, and spoke as angrily as she had done at first.

"I decline to argue with you any more on the subject. I am not qualified to refute coarseness, or untruth."

"So be it," said her son, carelessly, changing his position as if to leave the room. "I was not the one to commence the argument, please to remember."

"And you will please to remember on your part," she retorted fiercely, "that I totally decline to lend my countenance to the continuance of any such familiarities as I witnessed this evening between your cousin and yourself. If you choose to fly in my face ; to refuse to give up the absurd notion you appear to have conceived, or to permit Helena Brooke to return to her proper home and associates, I shall leave the house, and then you will be compelled to part with her."

"Not for long, though, unless by her own desire," returned her son, with eyes which flashed almost as much as her own. "Don't you try any tricks of that kind, mother, unless you wish to see me married, and my house closed against you as a home within the next month."

"Then will you promise to give up making love to this girl?"

"I will promise nothing! I shall do just as I think fit," replied Nigel Brooke, haughtily.

"You defy me, Nigel!" exclaimed his mother.

"Not at all, mother! but I claim at thirty-five to act on my own responsibility, and particularly in a matter of this kind. You have driven me to speak my mind to you, so you may as well understand at once, that from this night the conduct I may pursue towards my Cousin Helena will be regulated solely by her own wishes."

And without further parley he left the bedroom. Mrs Brooke looked after him for a moment, and then burst into tears.

She had been defeated. She knew that whether her son proposed to Nelly or not, thenceforth her own reign in Nigel's house was over.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHAT COULD HE MEAN BY IT?"

BUT meanwhile, what interpretation did Nelly put upon the kiss which she had so unexpectedly received? The rest of the poor little country girl was sadly disturbed by it. At first she had felt nothing but astonishment at the liberty which had been taken with her: then remembering her own age and that of her cousin, she grew terribly ashamed of the proceeding as she questioned what Nigel himself would think of her for having permitted him to embrace her so quietly: but when the latter feeling had had time to subside, and her cheeks had somewhat cooled down, under the consoling thought that she could not possibly have prevented it, she began to wonder what on earth could have made him dream of doing such a thing!

What could he mean by it? He had said he was old enough to be her father, but he had no right on that account (so Nelly argued with herself) to treat her like a child. But next, the doubt, whether, after all, it *was* treating her "like a child" crept into the girl's heart, and freshly suffused her cheeks with crimson.

Some may say it was a great deal of fuss to make about a very slight thing; and had Nelly Brooke been reared in a town, or lived twenty years later, she might not have thought so much about taking a kiss from her cousin. But it has been mentioned before, that from her childhood until that time no man, except her grand-

father or brother, had ever offered to do more than shake hands with her; and the strangeness of the proceeding startled her almost as much as the proceeding itself. She did not conceive it possible that her sex could ever give or accept kisses without bestowing a second thought upon the action. To her it bore far too deep a significance for that. For a woman—a real grown-up woman—to accept such an attention from a man without remonstrance, appeared in Nelly's unsophisticated eyes almost like confessing that she cared for him. And why on his part should a man offer such a tribute to any girl on whom he had no natural claim, unless he wished to tell her that she was dear to him?

These questions puzzled the simple little heart, and wearied the unphilosophical brain, long after both should have been hushed to rest beneath the influence of sleep. It was not often that Nelly's healthy vitality refused to submit itself to nature's nurse, but in the present instance it was many hours before she could compose herself, and with the first beams of the morning she was wide awake again, with that tormenting question still rapping at her heart—"*What could Cousin Nigel have meant by it?*"

Had Cousin Nigel himself been appealed to in the matter at the time of its occurrence, he would probably have answered, that he didn't know; but the interview he had subsequently had with his mother had considerably altered his feelings concerning it. Her searching questions and premature opposition had acted as a forcing-glass to his budding affection, and what overnight had appeared but as the tenderest of plants, was a full-grown tree in the morning. He also had lain awake, thinking over each trait which he had observed in Nelly's character, during the four weeks of their acquaintance; of the unselfishness, the candour, and the generosity of her disposition; and had arrived at the conclusion that if he could really win such a loving, innocent heart for himself, he would be the very luckiest of men. Not that he had forgotten or overlooked the horrible suggestions which his mother had made relative to the great attraction he possessed in his fortune; but Nigel Brooke was a sensible man; he was not one to be deceived, or blinded, or led completely astray, by the assertions of any one. He could see that his mother's surmises might have some truth in them; but he determined that he would himself be the judge of his cousin's motives, by her actions. A woman who cared only for the wealth of the man she consented to marry might conceal her real feelings, and feign affection for him so long as he did not put the question openly to her; but

there were few faces so brazen, Nigel fancied—and Nelly's certainly was not one of them—that they would permit their owners to tell a direct falsehood on so important a subject, and not betray themselves. So he resolved that Nelly should decide the matter : and he would regulate his own actions by her future conduct towards him.

But though he had settled all this very comfortably with himself, and though he was thirty-five years of age instead of eighteen, Nigel Brooke did not feel much more brave at the idea of facing his little cousin at the breakfast-table that morning, than she did at that of meeting him.

Whilst Nelly was blushing at her own reflection in the looking-glass, and failing at least half a dozen times in dressing her hair to her satisfaction, as she wondered what Cousin Nigel would say when he first saw her, or whether he would remind her by his looks of the dreadful thing which had happened overnight—he was recklessly casting aside collar after collar, which he had spoilt by attempting to fasten with his hot nervous hands, whilst he hoped, by Jove ! he hadn't frightened the dear little girl by what he had done, and wished, by George ! that he had thought of asking her permission first.

Meanwhile Mrs Brooke, who appeared at that time to be the one of the three who most needed pity, lay in her bed and refused to rise at all, declaring she was ill. She was very apt to be taken ill when she was in a bad temper, and to keep all the curtains drawn and her face from the light, and to refuse to speak to any one. This ruse of hers was rather a convenient one for her friends, and it would be a happy thing for all families, if their ill-tempered members would follow her example, and make a point of retiring to their rooms directly they found a fit coming on.

So Mrs Brooke, smothered in bed-clothes, and sulky as she could be, ordered buttered toast and tea into her own apartment, and sent a message to her son, to the effect that she was too unwell to appear at the breakfast-table ; a piece of news which he was sufficiently unfilial to be rather glad to receive than otherwise.

The first morning-bell had sounded, and Nelly, who had just commenced to pull down her hair again, hastily stuck in the remaining hair-pins, and knew that, right or wrong, it must remain as it was, for she had still to complete her dressing ; and her Aunt Eliza, although very unpunctual herself, was extremely particular that no one else in the house should be so.

At that moment, Pinner's tap sounded at her door.

"Come in!" cried Nelly, and the woman entered with a letter in her hand.

"Just come for you, miss, by the morning's post. Let me fasten up your dress whilst you open it."

Pinner had become very attentive, not to say servile, in her behaviour towards Nelly lately; but it is not to be supposed that the favour in which the young lady appeared to be with Mrs Brooke, and the prospect of her soon quitting the Chase and leaving half-crowns behind her, had anything to do with the change.

"Thank you!" said Nelly, taking advantage of the servant's offer.

The letter was from Bertie, and she was more anxious to read it than usual, because she had expected to receive it the morning before. As she glanced down the sheet of paper she was surprised at its brevity; but by the time she had mastered its contents, she was both surprised and miserable. It ran thus:—

"MY DEAREST NELLY,—You must return home *at once*; my grandfather is no better, and Nurse Aggie cannot attend to both of us. Start as soon as you receive this letter, and come *alone*; remember you are not to accept the escort of Nigel Brooke, or any other Brooke. Had I known half what I do now, about them, you should never have entered their house.—Your affectionate brother,
BERTIE."

And then he seemed to have thought better of sending her so curt and unsatisfactory a letter, for he had added a postscript to say:

"Don't worry yourself about what I have written, and don't tell anybody about this letter; it is nothing concerning you, and you shall know all when we meet. But do not lose an hour after you receive this. You will travel home very well; the same way you went; and when you arrive at Reddington, if there is no fly to be seen at the station, go to the George Inn and tell them to turn out theirs for you."

Nelly read the short epistle over and over again, but she could make nothing of it, excepting that Bertie had heard something dreadful of her aunt and cousin, and was very angry about it.

But what could he have heard?

Pinner reminded her that the second bell had rung, but her head was swimming with the shock and surprise, and even her

aunt's probable anger seemed to dwindle into a thing of no consequence beside it.

"Aren't you well, miss?" inquired the maid, as Nelly, with scared and puzzled features, sat down upon the bed.

"I feel rather giddy, Pinner. I think the morning must be close. Please open the window and leave me alone for a minute, and I shall soon be able to go down-stairs."

When she was by herself she took her brother's letter from the envelope, and read it over again. "Had I known half what I do about them, you should never have entered their house." What could Bertie have heard, and who could have told him? Surely no one had been so cruel as to set him against Cousin Nigel, who had been so kind and generous to her and him!

And then the girl turned sick with the sudden but absurd fancy that in some miraculous way her brother had come to the knowledge of what had passed between Nigel and herself the night before, and smiled at her own folly before the sickly feeling had died away. Yet what could it be? and how was she, when the news of her sudden departure had been broken to her aunt and cousin, effectually to reject the offers of assistance by which she felt sure it would be followed, without betraying the reason for her refusal? She felt so frightened at the mere idea of the task before her, that had Nigel not waited for her appearance, breakfast would have been half over before she descended to the breakfast-room; and still she had not learned her lesson. Yet she did not dream either of betraying her brother's confidence, or neglecting to comply with his wishes, for from their infancy Bertie, though in a loving way, had been her tyrant and ruler, and as she had come to Orpington obediently at his command, she would leave it in like manner.

Nigel Brooke, who, on finding that Nelly was so unusually late in making her appearance, had attributed her unpunctuality to a distaste to meeting him again, was still walking up and down the room when she entered it, looking out of the windows and into the fireplace, and wishing he had been shot before he had scared her with his impetuosity. But there was something besides fear in Nelly's face, and her cousin perceived it at the first glance. It was the indecision as to what she should say to him, mingled with the constraint natural to anyone with such a task in prospect, which imparted to her the appearance of coldness, for which her cousin gave her credit. But so far from feeling cold towards him for his conduct of the evening before, the news she had just

received occupied her thoughts almost to the exclusion of that which had so troubled them previously, but which, under present circumstances she would hardly have had the heart even to resent.

"Is Aunt Eliza not down yet?" was her first inquiry, as she timidly dropped the hand he proffered her.

"No!" replied her cousin, the expectations with which he had anticipated her entrance being considerably damped by the formality of her salutation; "she is not well this morning, I am sorry to say; so we must go to breakfast without her."

They sat down, one on each side of a large round table: and when the servants had solemnly provided them with tea and coffee from the sideboard, and the dumb-waiter, laden with a relay of dishes, had been wheeled to Nigel's side, they found themselves alone.

Nelly finished one piece of toast, and then another, resolving within herself each time that the disappearance of the next morsel should be the signal for her to tell her cousin of the letter she had received; but at the end of her breakfast, she was no nearer the completion of her object. A few commonplace remarks had passed between them, but nothing more; and then Nigel Brooke rose from the table, and stood with his back to the fireplace.

It was always the first move towards breaking up the breakfast party. Nelly saw that the moment was come for her to speak, and after all, it was easier to tell him than his mother. So in a very dry, husky voice she commenced—

"Cousin Nigel!"

"Well, Nelly," he said, expectantly.

"I am going home to-day."

"Going home! what do you mean?"

"I have had a letter from Bertie by this morning's post, and he wishes me to return at once: grandpapa is ill, and I am wanted."

"Oh, my poor child, I am so sorry," exclaimed her cousin with genuine concern,—*"not only that the old man is suffering, but that your visit is to be cut short by it. But is it so very urgent, Nelly? Are you sure that they cannot spare you for a few days longer?"*

She shook her head.

"Bertie says I am to go *at once*," she repeated, "that I am not to lose an hour. I am afraid poor grandpapa must be worse than when he last wrote."

"But it is a long journey for you to take on so short a notice, Nelly. Surely to-morrow will be time enough."

"I must go to-day if I can," she replied; "I have very little to pack, you know, and Pinner promised to put up my things whilst we were at breakfast. Which is the earliest train by which I could start?"

"If you *must* go to-day (though I cannot see the necessity for it, Nelly), there is a train leaves Hilstone for Reddington at noon. But I cannot let you go alone: I shall take you home myself, so you had best see my mother, and ask her advice on the subject."

But at the mention of his providing himself as escort, although she had fully expected it, Nelly turned quite pale.

"Oh no, Cousin Nigel; indeed you must not go with me, I can very well go alone. I came here all by myself, you know; and if you will only let me have the carriage to go to the Hilstone station in, I shall get on very well."

"What nonsense!" he exclaimed; "I will not hear of such a thing. Your coming here was a very different affair. We expected you, and sent to meet you, and Orpington is only two miles from the station; but your brother cannot even be certain that you will start to-day, and if he were, who has he to send to Reddington to wait for you? You will arrive there late in the evening, and be stranded, fourteen miles from your home, and perhaps unable to get a conveyance to go on in. It would be madness, Nelly, perfect folly! what could you do by yourself at night in a strange town? I consider that you are under my care, and I cannot permit such a thing; so pray do not propose it again. Whenever you go back to Little Bickton, I go with you."

Nelly leant back in her seat in despair. What could she say which should appear at all reasonable, to turn him from his purpose.

After a moment's thought, she rose, and, going up to her cousin's side, said firmly—

"Cousin Nigel, you *cannot* go with me to-day; I do not wish it."

"And why not, Nelly?" he asked, quickly; "tell me the truth."

"There is nothing to tell," she replied, nervously, "excepting that I do not *wish* you to go with me. I must go home to-day, but I must go alone."

"Will you let me send a servant with you as far as Reddington?" he asked, a sudden suspicion flashing on his mind. She, on her part, imagining that if she agreed to this proposal, the other would be dropped, acquiesced eagerly.

"Then it is *my* presence which is unpleasant to you, Nelly?"

She drooped her head.

"Tell me the truth, child," he repeated almost fiercely, as he seized her hand; "tell me the real truth, and put me out of pain. Is it *I* only to whom you object as a travelling companion?"

"Yes!" she answered, in a very low tone, but the one word was enough for him.

At that moment, notwithstanding his belief in her sincerity, he was almost ready to suspect that the story of her having received a summons to Little Bickton was merely an excuse to rid herself the sooner of his presence. As the idea struck his mind, a chill ran through his frame, and he released the hand which he had taken.

"I have made a fool of myself," he said, in a pained voice. "Forget what has passed between us, Nelly, and let us be friends still." And then, with affected indifference, he continued:—"I might have guessed that my presence at Little Bickton would be inconvenient just now, when my grandfather is so ill; I should be stranded at Reddington myself, and have no more idea what to do than you would, but the maid Pinner shall travel with you, and see that you procure a proper conveyance to Bickton. She can sleep at Reddington herself, and return to Hilstone to-morrow. Would you mind seeing my mother about it at once, or shall I pave the way for you?"

"I can do it, thank you," she said, sadly. After having given her Cousin Nigel such a wrong impression of her feeling respecting himself, the wrath of her Aunt Eliza seemed a very little trouble, yet she hardly knew what else she could have said to him.

But to Nelly's surprise, Mrs Brooke did not appear to be half so angry or put out at her news as she had anticipated. It still wanted ten days of the date when she had always intended to return home, and her aunt had repeatedly informed her that she should never be able to part with her when the time came. Instead of which, she listened to her niece's faltering narrative of the letter she had received, and the necessity for her immediate return, without once interrupting her with objections or regrets. The fact being that Mrs Brooke, who was conscious that she had not deserved much in this instance at the hands of Providence, was wondering to herself by what lucky chance her wishes for Nelly's departure should have been so miraculously granted.

"I shall take home the lace jacket and the muslin cuffs and collars I am embroidering for you, Aunt Eliza," poor Nelly said, with quivering lips, "and send them you as soon as they are finished; and I am very much obliged to you for all the kindness

you have shown me, and I shall never—never forget it,” concluded the girl, in a burst of tears.

“There, there! my dear!” said her aunt, with an affected attempt at comfort, “I am quite sure you will not; and any time will do for the collars and sleeves. You needn’t hurry yourself over them, for I daresay you will have enough to do with your poor sick grandpapa.”

“Yes,” sobbed Nelly; “and if it wasn’t that grandpapa is ill, and poor Bertie so helpless, I wouldn’t have thought of leaving you so suddenly—particularly as I am of use to you; but they have no one to do anything for them but old Aggie, you see—and Bertie wants so much attention, and ”——

“Oh yes! my dear; I understand it all, perfectly,” replied her aunt; “of course you could do nothing else but go to them—it would be very wrong if you did not. Old people are soon gone, this weather—the least thing will take them off—and you might never see your poor grandfather again, if you delayed to return.”

At this supposition Nelly’s fears gained the upper hand of her distress.

“Do you really think he can be so ill as that?” she asked, with frightened eyes. “Have you heard anything, Aunt Eliza? Did they write to you as well?”

“Write to me, my dear!” said Mrs Brooke, pettishly; “who should write to me? I thought you said, yourself, that the old man was worse.”

“Well, I think he must be worse,” said truthful Nelly, her sudden alarm allayed by her aunt’s reply, “else Bertie would have given me a day or two to prepare for my journey in, but he particularly begs me not to lose a moment.”

“Of course; and you would be very wrong to do so; and perhaps I had best say good-bye to you at once, as you must have some arrangements to make before starting, and my head aches sadly. Good-bye, my dear; you can write to me after a few days, and let me know how your grandfather goes on—and please tell one of the servants, as you go out, to send my son to me.”

The news of Nelly’s intended departure had almost cured Mrs Brooke of her ill-temper, particularly as she guessed from the girl’s dejection that nothing satisfactory could have passed between her and Nigel. She even felt equal to seeing the latter, and trying to patch up their quarrel of the night before.

Nelly, on the contrary, left the bedroom sobbing bitterly. She was glad to go home—poor little soul—but she was very grateful

for all the kindness which she had experienced at Orpington, and it went to her heart to think she was about to leave her friends in so sudden a manner, and that it would not be long, perhaps, before they knew what her brother had told her in his letter. What would they think of her? How ungrateful her Aunt Eliza would say she was, and how unworthy of all the pretty presents which she had given her; and Cousin Nigel, who had taken her out on horseback, and done all he could to give her pleasure—what kind of return would he consider this, for the kindness he had shown her?

When she reached her bedroom, she found that Pinner had already been informed that she was to accompany her to Reddington; and that another servant was employed in packing and cording her box. Nothing was left for Nelly to do but to bathe her swollen eyes, and put on her walking apparel; and her arrangements had not long been completed when a single knock at her door, and the words in her cousin's voice—"Nelly, the train starts at ten minutes to twelve, and the carriage will be round in five minutes"—told her that her connexion with Orpington Chase would soon be severed.

She followed her luggage down-stairs, and took her seat mechanically upon one of the hall chairs. As soon as the carriage wheels sounded on the gravel drive, the door of the breakfast-room, which was just opposite, opened, and her Cousin Nigel appeared.

"What! are you here, Nelly?" he said, reproachfully. "You need not have grudged me the last five minutes!" and holding out his hand, he led her to the vehicle.

She was to travel as far as Hilstone station alone, for the trunk was in the rumble, and the maid preferred to sit on the box with the coachman, so the cousins' farewell was exchanged in privacy.

"God bless you, child," said Nigel Brooke, even more paternally than usual; "I would have gone as far as the station with you, only I know you would rather I did not."

She tried to murmur something about being obliged and not "being ungrateful," but he scarcely caught the meaning of her words.

"Don't cry, Nelly!" he said, entreatingly; "it's over now, and I didn't mean to vex you. Remember me to Bertie and to the old man, and let us know of your safe arrival—and—we shall meet again some day soon, shan't we? Drive on, Saunders!"

Then, as the carriage commenced to move, he ran by the side

of it for a few yards, as he hotly repeated, "Don't cry, my *darling*, for Heaven's sake."

And though Nelly did not take his advice, in so far that she cried quite as much on the way home as she had done on the way there, she could not help recalling to herself the strange expressions that her Cousin Nigel had used to her that morning, and wondering what they meant.

CHAPTER XV

NELLY'S WELCOME HOME.

BUT though Nelly Brooke both distressed and perplexed herself about what had occurred at Orpington Chase all the way to Reddington, as soon as she arrived at that very dull and second-rate country town, which, on account of various changes and delays, was not until six o'clock the same evening, she forgot her trouble in the magical thought that she was so near her home again. The solitary fly was luckily in waiting, and as she was the only passenger who had to travel beyond the town, she had no difficulty in procuring it; and Pinner, finding that she could return to Hilstone by a night train, prepared, after a good tea at the George Inn, to take advantage of it, as she had received orders to do.

So Nelly set off, as her Cousin Nigel had done some weeks previously, to traverse the fourteen miles of hilly country which lay between Reddington and Little Bickton, in a vehicle which never exceeded its five miles an hour even on level ground. But the girl's feelings with respect to the necessary inconvenience and delay greatly differed from what his had been. She was as impatient, it is true—indeed far more so, but it was the impatience of love and not of temper.

Her feet once more upon Kentish soil, and her face set in the direction of home, her eagerness to gain it became almost beyond her powers of endurance, and her only wonder was how she had managed to live so long away from it. She grew sick with her longing, as she sat a prisoner in solitary confinement in the Reddington fly; and as soon as they came to the first hill, and the driver descended from his box in order to ease the horse, his passenger jumped out also, and expressed her intention of walking by his side.

"Don't you do that, miss," said the man, thinking the act was prompted by compassion for his animal; "he'd carry half a dozen

of such as you, and not feel it. I shouldn't do it myself on a dry night like this, but I likes to stretch my legs occasionally."

"And I like to stretch my legs, too, Thompson," replied Nelly, who knew the driver by name; "and I am so impatient to get to Bickton, that I feel as if I couldn't sit in the fly whilst it goes so slowly."

"You've been away for a goodish spell, miss."

"Three weeks last Thursday, Thompson, and it has seemed like three months to me. I should never be contented away from Bickton. Have you been there lately?"

"To Bickton, miss? well, no! I can't say I have, not since I drove that strange gentleman back from the Farm Cottage to Reddington. He *was* a quick-tempered one, to be sure."

"Was he?" said Nelly, timidly.

"Well, I put him down as such, miss, leastways on the road there. But there was a mortal sight of wet that night, there's no denying. He was a deal more sociable as we returned, and asked a mint o' questions about the place and people."

"Have you heard any news from the Cottage lately, Thompson?" was her next inquiry. "My grandpapa has not been well. That is the reason I am returning home to day."

"Well, now," exclaimed the man, "that's strange, sure-ly, I'm a-talking to the granddaughter of old Mr Brooke, ain't I, miss?"

Nelly replied in the affirmative.

"I did hear a summat about him last market-day, though 'twas a mere chance that it reached me. I was cleaning my horse in the stable-yard, when in come Farmer Weston and another gentleman. 'How's the old gentleman at the Farm Cottage?' says one. 'Mortal bad,' says the other (that was Farmer Weston, you know, miss): 'we all think he's a-going.'"

The man looked round at Nelly as he made this communication, as though he had said the most ordinary thing possible, and was startled by the expression in her face.

"Oh! Thompson, can it really be true? They never told me he was so ill as that! Pray drive me home as fast as ever you can, and I'll give you half a crown for yourself."

Nelly was in a position at the moment to make this offer, for her cousin had taken care that his mother should supply her little purse with money before she started. But the genuine distress so visibly pictured in her face touched Thompson to that degree, that he shook his head to intimate that he refused to take the bribe.

"I'll take you to Bickton as quick as ever one horse can do it, miss, and I don't want nothing over my fare for it. I'm real sorry I told you anything to make you uneasy, and I daresay it was only the gentleman's talk after all."

But this latter consideration had little effect in soothing poor Nelly's fears, and she spent the rest of the journey in miserable suspense, conjuring up so much evil that might have happened to each of the beloved inmates of the Farm Cottage during her absence, that she forgot everything but her ardent desire to meet her brother and grandfather and old Aggie again, and assure herself that they existed to welcome her.

Orpington Chase, its inhabitants and its troubles, faded away in the distance, and home filled her thoughts to the exclusion of all else. In fancy she ran a dozen times into the old familiar passage, and burst into the sitting-room, and threw herself into the arms of Bertie, lying on his sofa, and saw her old grandfather dozing in his arm-chair, only looking a little paler than usual, and presently waking up to assure her it was her absence which had affected him, and that now she had returned he was himself once more; or the scene darkened, and she thought she might have to knock again and again for admission at the Cottage, and that at last old Nurse Aggie would come down to the door, with stealthy tread and a solemn face, and she would hear that her grandfather was lying up-stairs dead and stretched out upon his bier. How would such fanciful fears affect an excitable and affectionate girl as she sat alone in a fly in the dark for nearly three hours, for it was nine o'clock before she reached Little Bickton! Joined to the slowness of her progression, and the solitude and suspense she was enduring, they affected Nelly to such a degree, that she seemed to turn to stone beneath their influence, and by the time the wheels of the fly grated before the Cottage door, she had scarcely strength to leave it. But as they invariably do in such cases, events turned out very differently from what she had anticipated. The front door was opened simultaneously with that of the fly, and Bertie, making sure of her arrival, had crept into the passage, followed by Nurse Aggie with a lighted candle. With a cry of exceeding joy, the girl sprung to the ground, and took her brother's wasted form into her arms, and pressed it to her bosom. Although in reality not altered from the moment when they parted, how pale and thin he looked in her loving eyes. She thought he must have shrunk to half his size since she had seen him last. But he was there, her Bertie, her brother,

her second self; the face she had loved from infancy was pressed against her own, and the powerful reaction could only end in tears.

"Oh, Bertie! Bertie!" she sobbed, as they clung to each other, "how glad I am to see you, darling,—how thankful I am to be at home again!"

Bertie was not altogether unaffected on his part, for his dependence on his sister had made him strangely feel her unaccustomed absence, though the mysterious clinging sympathy which is supposed to connect most twin children seemed in this case to exist on her side alone. He kissed her fondly, and did not seem impatient of her tears, though he tried to draw her away from the scrutiny of the coachman and the nurse.

"Come with me, dear!" he whispered, as he led her into the dining-room. "I felt sure that you would come to-night. We ought never to be separated, Nell; we can't do without each other; we should have been born with a ligature between us, like the famous Siamese twins."

"Oh, I wish we had," said the foolish girl, smiling in the midst of her tears; then, as they entered the sitting-room, and she caught sight of her grandfather's empty chair, she continued anxiously, "But how is grandpapa, Bertie?"

"Oh, he's all right," said her brother, carelessly.

"All right, darling?"

The tone of surprise recalled Robert's wondering fancy; he remembered the letter he had written to summon his sister home, and in a different tone, continued, "That is to say, he has had a bad cold, and not been well otherwise for the last fortnight, but he is no worse than he was. His illness was not the real reason of my desire for your return, Nelly, as you must have seen."

"Yes, but let us talk of that presently, darling," she said, with a sigh, as she prepared to lay aside her walking things, and help old Aggie in the disposal of her luggage. The next ten minutes passed very boisterously. The mastiff Thug nearly went frantic when he was made aware of his mistress's arrival, and leapt at her with sufficient violence to throw her down, in his clumsy endeavours to give her a hearty welcome; and the old nurse, although much less vehement, was hardly less demonstrative in her delight at regaining "*her* child," as she always called Nelly, in contradistinction to her brother.

"Ah! it's a sight for sore eyes to see you again, Miss Nelly, for we've had a bitter time of it since you been away, I can tell you," she said, as the girl followed her into the kitchen.

"That I'm sure you must, nursey, and there hasn't been a day that I haven't wished I were back again to help you. It will be quite a treat to shake up the beds again, and to make pies and puddings as I used to do, and to leave off playing at being a fine lady. Being a fine lady, and doing nothing but sit in the drawing-room or drive in a carriage, doesn't suit me at all, Aggie; I have often and often longed to be back again amongst the cabbages, at dear old Bickton."

"Well, you've got your wish then, you see," replied the old woman, with a touch of discontent in her voice,—“not that but what I think sitting in a drawing-room fitter for you than helping such as me with the house and kitchen work. But 't isn't the work, Miss Nelly, as I complain of; I've worked hard all my life, and that you know, but I like to have a bit of thanks when all's done, and that's what I've never got from any one since I lost sight of your bonny face, my bird."

"Do you think grandpapa is really ill, Aggie?" said Nelly, anxious to change the subject.

"I don't think nothing about it, I am sure on't," replied the old woman. "When a gentleman of that age takes to his bed, it isn't a good sign; and he's been close to his for the last week."

"Hasn't the doctor been sent for?" exclaimed Nelly, in alarm.

"No, he haven't," replied Aggie, sturdily.

"But why not, Aggie?"

"That's more than I know, Miss Nelly; all I can say is, now that you've come home, I hope you'll have things your own way, for they have been in a queer way since you left. Quarrelling here, and loud words there, and bad language used; I never heard the like of it since I lived in this house afore, and I don't wish to hear it again. If you want the doctor for to see your grandpa, miss, you'd best ask Master Robert's leave, for he's master here now, or I'm quite mistaken."

"I'm grieved to hear you speak like this, nursey," said Nelly, sorrowfully, as she laid her hand on the old woman's withered arm. "You know that I have always loved you and been grateful to you."

"Bless you, my darling," replied Aggie, as she turned and kissed the blooming cheek of her nurseling; "you've always been everything that's good to all of us, and that we know well enough. But now, go you into the parlour again, or perhaps Master Robert may be put out; and I'll send you up supper as soon as ever it is ready."

"Let me help you, nurse."

"Not I—not on this first night, Miss Nelly—for all the world. It will be up in five minutes at the latest."

"Can't I see grandpapa this evening?"

"Well, I don't see the use, my dear; he's fast asleep, and your going in might rouse him. Best leave that till to-morrow morning."

"I think we should send for Mr Bumble to see grandpapa, Bertie," said Nelly, as she re-entered the dining-room.

"Very well, dear," he replied, "do what you please; I have waited for your return to settle everything of that sort. If the old man wants looking to, you had better write to Bumble."

The supper tray now made its appearance, and Nelly, with Thug close beside her—with his huge head thrust lovingly into her lap, sat down to it in solitary state. "Won't you have some supper, Bertie?" she said to her brother.

"No, thanks; for I am not used to eating at this hour, you know."

"Nor I," replied his sister, smiling, "and I feel too happy to be hungry, though I ought to be."

But as she pronounced the words, "*Nor I*," which brought back the habits of the Chase to her recollection, she suddenly remembered that the reason for which she found herself at home, was as yet a mystery to her; and the expression of her face changed so rapidly that her brother exclaimed—"How now! what's the matter, Nell?"

She had forgotten it till that moment; she had been so occupied with Thug and old Aggie, with her grandfather's illness, and the delight of meeting her brother again, that she had entirely forgotten to ask him why she had been so unexpectedly recalled; and what it was so dreadful that he had heard against their aunt and cousin, that he regretted she had ever entered their house.

"Bertie!" she gasped in her eagerness, "you have not yet told me why you sent for me to come home. Oh! I *was* so astonished and surprised, and I didn't in the least know what to say to them at the Chase about it. I think—I am afraid," she continued, falteringly, "that I quite offended Cousin Nigel this morning by refusing his offer to accompany me home."

"All the better if you did!" replied Robert Brooke, rudely.

"But, darling, tell me what it is; what can have changed all your feelings regarding them, and made you so angry about my going there. I did so for your sake, Bertie."

"You had better take your supper first, Nelly; for you will have no appetite afterwards, I can tell you."

"Oh! but I *must* know," said the girl in a piteous tone, as she left the table and knelt by her brother's side. "Bertie, dear, do tell me, for they have been so kind to me all the time, and your letter made me so unhappy."

"*Kind to you,*" repeated Bertie in a voice of contempt. "Yes! and well they may be. But if Mr Nigel Brooke, or his fine lady of a mother, imagines that a few palavering words and a few old rags, from them now, will wipe out the irreparable injury their father and husband did us, they are vastly mistaken. I hope you said good-bye to them once and for ever, Nell, for you will never see them again."

At this she called out so loudly that old Aggie ran from the kitchen to see what was the matter with "*her* child," but trotted back again upon hearing the plaintive words which followed the exclamation.

"Never see them again, Bertie—never see Aunt Eliza, who has been so very kind to me—or Cou—cou—cousin Nigel again? Oh! you cannot be in earnest: you have heard something that is not true. It is all a mistake, dear: depend upon it—and when you find it out you will be sorry you spoke of them like this."

"It is not a mistake," said the young man, excitedly; "it is as true, Nelly—as that I wish to God we had never been born."

"Bertie, Bertie, darling, don't look like that: speak to me—tell me what it is—you cannot think how horrible is this suspense!"

He had risen from the sofa now, and was standing whilst she still clung about his knees.

"Well! if you will know it," he exclaimed loudly, "here it is, and if you can tell me afterwards that you still care to sit at the board of Nigel Brooke, and eat his bread, and accept his favours, you are not my sister, and I will not own you as such. *His father murdered ours!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

ROBERT BROOKE TELLS HIS SISTER HALF THE TRUTH.

THE sound of the word "murder" is sufficiently awful at any time, but particularly when it is used in connexion with any one belonging to ourselves.

Nelly Brooke, as she heard it, rose slowly from her kneeling position, and dropped, white and trembling, on the sofa, which

her brother had just vacated. For a moment neither of the twins spoke to each other.

"Well ! what do you think of it ?" then demanded Robert, breaking the silence.

"I cannot believe it !" she answered, in an awe-struck tone.

"But it is true, I tell you ; true as gospel."

"*Murdered* him," repeated Nelly, wonderingly ; "murdered his own brother ! it is impossible."

"You may call it what you please," said Robert Brooke ; "I call it murder. It is sufficient for me to know that Nigel Brooke's father challenged mine, and shot him down like a dog, whilst his opponent fired in the air. I wish he hadn't : I wish he had shot him through the heart, the cowardly cur."

"But why did they fight ?" asked Nelly ; "for what reason ?"

At this question the face of her brother changed. He visibly showed his discomfiture ; and it was not until she had repeated it that he sulkily replied—

"The cause signifies little ; the fact remains."

"And does he, does Cousin Nigel, you think, know of this ?"

"The name of the man you speak of, Nelly, is Nigel Brooke, and don't let me hear you call him anything else again ; he is not your cousin nor mine, and never shall be."

"We are the children of brothers," she said, in refutation of Robert's assertion, but he did not appear to hear her words. "We must be cousins since our fathers were brothers," she repeated after a short pause.

"Men who call each other out for the purpose of being shot at are not entitled to the name of brothers," he at length replied ; "but it little matters what our actual relationship to this man may be—were it twice as near, we never could be otherwise than strangers."

"But who told you of this dreadful story, Bertie ?" she demanded, half hoping that her brother might have gathered it from some questionable authority.

"My grandfather," he said, curtly.

"What ! grandpapa ? *He* says that one of his sons killed the other. Then it must be true ! Oh, how shocking, how terrible !"—and overcome with the idea of her unknown father lying bleeding and dead by the act of his own brother, the girl covered her face with her hands.

"Now ! what would you say to going back to Orpington Chase, and joining in their pleasures, and partaking of their

luxuries, Nelly?" inquired Robert in a voice which was almost triumphant.

"I don't wish to go back," she said, shuddering; "I never wish to leave home again; but, Bertie, it was not our cousin—I mean it was not Nigel Brooke's fault that his father behaved so cruelly. Surely he had nothing to do with it. Is it always to prevent his being kind to us, or caring for us?"

She thought afterwards that she had never seen her brother look so angrily at her in his life, as he did when he turned towards her now.

"Are you regretting the leeks and garlic of Egypt?" he cried. "Do you wish to keep up the acquaintance of the son of your father's murderer,—the son of the man who made us what we are—orphans, ay! and worse than orphans; looked down upon, poverty-stricken, obscure,—who feathered his own nest, and left his child independent, whilst the children of the man he murdered remain without a friend in the world?"

"But he tries to make it up to us, and you refuse to let him," she said, bold in her attempted defence of those who had been kind to her, though timid as a dove, generally speaking, in opposing any assertion of her brother's.

Robert Brooke looked at her with the greatest contempt.

"Bah!" he said, "it is of no use talking to a girl; they have no ideas beyond their dresses and bonnets! Have you no sense of honour, Nelly; no sense of justice; no sense of what is right and consistent to do?"

"Oh! I hope I have, Bertie," she said, earnestly; "but perhaps you have not explained it sufficiently to me. Tell me all, the whole truth, just as it happened, and I shall better understand it."

"The whole truth, as you call it, is simply that my grandfather and I, being left alone together for the first time in my remembrance, have talked more to each other than we ever did before. We have had one or two very stiff arguments, I can tell you, Nelly, and the old gentleman made himself more disagreeable than I had given him credit for being able to do."

"You didn't vex him, Bertie darling, did you?" said his sister, anxiously.

"I didn't give him any cause to be vexed, which is as much as I can answer for. I only told him, what I had intended to do for some time past, that I insisted upon hearing the whole story of the circumstances attending our birth and the death of our parents.

I asked him to account for his having kept us in this place all our lives, without proper associates or advantages ; and I asked him what provision he had made for us, and what he intended to become of us after his death."

"And what did he tell you, Bertie?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"He told me that which I wish I had died before I had ever heard," returned the young man, gloomily.

"Don't say so, dear, it can't be as bad as that," she said, caressingly, as she moved nearer to his side. "If we are orphans, Bertie, we have each other."

He turned at the loving words, and kissed her eagerly.

"My dearest sister," he exclaimed, "if I hadn't known you were coming back to Little Bickton and would miss me, I would have cut my throat the day I heard it."

"Bertie, you frighten me! tell me the whole story."

"The whole is very little, Nelly, but it is painful enough to tell—when I have finished it, don't ask for it again. Nigel Brooke's father was a merchant; ours was an officer in the army. They had a serious cause for quarrel, but one which might have been in some measure atoned for, if it had been settled in the right way. Instead of which, Nigel Brooke's father followed ours to Malta, where he had gone with his regiment, and when there insulted him so grossly that he had no choice but to accept the challenge with which the indignity was accompanied. They met; and as I have told you, the one was shot like a dog, whilst the other escaped without injury. We were not born at that time, Nelly; but two months afterwards we entered the world, worse luck, and our poor mother, who had drooped ever since the shock of our father's death, quitted it. And that's the whole affair."

"Poor mother!" sighed Nelly; "and she was so young too, Aggie says—only eighteen—just our age now."

"Never mind that," replied her brother; "she's far better where she is, and I for one feel glad to think she is quit of all her trouble. But had our father lived, things might have been very different. I could never have forgiven the hand which took his life."

"Nor I," said Nelly, softly; "but he is dead too now."

"But his wife—do you imagine that his wife might not have exerted her influence over him, had she so chosen? Why, even his son was nearly a man at that time."

"Men do not often consult their wives and children when they are going to do a wrong thing, Bertie."

He stamped his foot impatiently.

"You aggravate me, Nelly; you are trying to defend this man and his mother, when you should feel the same loathing for them that I do."

"I am sorry I aggravate you, dear Bertie. No one could feel more shocked and horrified at what you have told me than myself; and were our uncle still alive, I"—

"Were he alive," interrupted her brother, eagerly, "lame as I am, I would not rest night or day until I had searched him out, and called him to account for my father's death; but since he is past my reach, I will not admit his son, the man who is reaping the benefit of a murderer's success, to my friendship, not even to my acquaintance. I will not receive him here, nor go to see him there; nor will you either, Nelly, if you wish to keep my affection. Had I known the other day, when he entered these doors with his hypocritical palaver about the ties of relationship, and his wish that we should all go and live with him at Orpington, who he was, and what he was, I would have struck him in the face before I had taken his hand in friendship. And do you think I would have permitted you to go and visit at the Chase, and accept their presents and their flattery, and their fine dinners, and horses and company, if I had thought that they came from the wife and the son of your father's murderer? Of course, I would not! I hope you've not brought any of the fine things they gave you home with you, for I will burn and destroy every one of them if you have. They are the price of blood, the handsome reparation which they are trying to make in exchange for your father's life. Have you many of them? tell me the truth, for I'll cut up your whole wardrobe if you don't."

"Very few, dear Bertie, really very few, and I will send them out of the house to-morrow if you wish it."

"I do wish it; I had rather you went in rags all your days, than wore that woman's gifts. Give them away, or throw them away, as you choose, but don't let me see or hear of them again. And don't let me hear that man's name either," he continued, after a slight pause, as, exhausted with the excitement he had undergone, he threw himself upon his sofa; "or a word about the Chase or your doings there: it is a sufficiently sore thought for me that you have ever been in their house. What could my grandfather have been about to consent to it? He must be in his dotage."

"But if they write?" said Nelly, nervously.

"If *who* write?"

"Aunt Eliza or Cousin Nigel."

"Let them write."

"But the last thing they said, Bertie, was to beg me to let them know of my safe arrival, and they sent a servant with me, all the way to Reddington, and it will seem so very—so very ungrateful, after all they've done for me, particularly if they don't know the reason."

"Leave me to tell them the reason," replied Robert, ominously. "If a letter comes for you, *I* will answer it, and I'll warrant you do not receive a second."

Then he perceived that his sister was crying, and made an impatient gesture at the discovery.

"It is all so very, very miserable," she said, apologetically; "it has been such a dreadful mistake from beginning to end."

"It is not too late to remedy it," returned Robert, "unless you are sorry to come home again."

This suspicion from Bertie was agony to her; she cast herself by his side and implored him not to think so for a single moment.

"Darling," she exclaimed, with all the fervour of her nature, "you are everything to me, and you know it. You cannot think how often, since I have been away, I have lain awake and cried because I had not bid you good-night, and could not go to sleep without it. I could not live without you, brother. I did not like to appear ungrateful and indifferent to them; but nothing is anything to me in comparison with you."

"I know that, Nelly," he replied, as he returned her caresses, "and we must continue to be everything to each other now. All my fine dreams of leaving Bickton for a more lively place have passed away, and here we will remain for the rest of our lives; won't we? A loving old maid and bachelor, if not a very jolly one. But I think I have stayed up as long as is good for me, dear, for I feel quite tired. Will you help me up to bed? It will be heaven to feel your soft hands about me, after old Aggie's bits of horn."

All idea of supper had been long repudiated; and the chops and potatoes, which the old nurse had laid in expressly for the welcome of "her child," were as cold as they had been before she placed them on the fire; and so Nelly rose, and winding her arm round Bertie, they passed in the old, loving fashion out into the passage, and up the narrow staircase.

At the sound of their footsteps, Aggie came out from the kitchen.

"Well, you've been a long time making up your minds for bed, I'm thinking; and it's a pity, Master Robert, that you didn't let your sister go before this, for she must be main tired with her journey. Let me tend your brother this evening, my dear. I've done it often enough lately, and go you to your own room, for you must be nigh worn out."

But Robert would not hear of an exchange, and his sister seconded his refusal.

"I've had more than enough of your handling, thank you, nurse," he said, laughing, "not to be thankful for a change when I can get it, and Nelly wishes to go with me, don't you, Nell?"

"Of course I do, darling. Do you think I would let any one attend to you to-night but myself? I am too happy to be able to do it."

"He's a selfish creature," soliloquised the old nurse, as she returned to the kitchen, "and always were, for I mind when they were babes together, he'd invariable take the cake or the sweetie from her mouth and put it in his own. And she smiling at him all the while. As she always have smiled. Bless her! There's more good in her little finger than there is in his whole body."

Poor Nelly, what with her varied emotion and her long journey, was indeed sadly tired, but her affection hardly permitted her to feel so. Her eyes were swollen and painful, and her head ached, and so did her legs, but she would not omit one single minutia of her brother's toilet. She even took the trouble to do many little things for him that he was quite able to do for himself, but for which he generally, when he could, enlisted his sister's services; and when at length he stretched himself upon his bed and said, "I haven't felt so comfortable since you left me, Nell," she was amply repaid for all her fatigue.

"I must read to you, Bertie, before I go," she said, taking up his Bible; "I suppose you have been obliged to do that for yourself since we have been parted?"

"Yes," he replied, rather hesitatingly.

"But you have not moved the marker, dear!" she exclaimed, as she opened the book. "I know that, because I have been reading the same chapter every night, as we agreed to do; oh! Bertie, you don't mean to say you have not read it at all!"

"Well, if you must know the truth, Nell, I am afraid I haven't," he said, though reluctantly; "but it's such a bore you see—and—don't look so vexed, puss, because I couldn't help it."

"Never mind, darling," she answered, quietly. "I will read to you now."

She finished the portion, and then rose to bid him good-night. As she took him in her arms, he seemed so dear to her, and so fragile a creature to be everything she possessed in the world, that a sudden impulse moved her to exclaim—

“Bertie, let me say my prayers here for to-night, let me kneel by the side of your bed; and put your hand in mine, and we will say our prayers together;” and as she spoke, she sunk upon her knees, and buried her face upon her brother’s hand.

What Robert Brooke prayed for was best known to himself, but Nelly’s prayer was all for patience under the trial which had come upon her. For it was a trial, and destined to be a heavy one—though as yet she guessed it not.

But when her prayer was concluded, she was enabled to go quietly to her own room, and compose herself to rest, without shedding any more tears for the estrangement which must thenceforth exist between herself and her friends at Orpington Chase.

CHAPTER XVII.

NELLY HOLDS A VIGIL WITH THE VICAR.

NELLY’s first thoughts upon waking the next morning were for her grandfather, and her first visit was paid to his room, where she was shocked to find him strangely altered from what she had seen him last. Mr Brooke, within the memory of his granddaughter, had always been a spare, withered old man; but his skin had not worn the appearance of parchment which it did now, nor had he ever, with all his taciturn and unsociable habits, displayed such extreme languor as seemed to have come over him with his illness. Nelly would not have been surprised to find him very irritable and unpleasant; but it startled her to see that neither the fact of her unexpected return, nor anything she said, had the power to rouse the least spark of interest in the old man’s breast. He was lying on his side when she entered the room, vacantly gazing at the streaks of light which the morning sun was painting across his window-blind, and appeared to notice neither her entrance nor the kiss with which she saluted his unlikelike cheek, unless raising his dim eyes for a moment to her face might be termed such.

“Well, grandpapa!” said the girl, cheerfully, as she drew a chair towards him and sat down by the bedside, “are you not surprised to see me home again?”

The old man looked at her for a moment, and then said inquiringly—

"You've been away, my dear?"

"Now, I do think you might have invented a better compliment to pay me on my return than that, grandpapa," replied Nelly, pretending to pout. "Here have I been flattering myself all the time that you missed me terribly, and I can see that you are not quite sure whether I have been in the house or not."

But the pleasant tones did not provoke any corresponding cheerfulness from Mr Brooke. He sighed once or twice, and then turned his eyes away from Nelly's face in the direction of the window-blind.

"Will you have the blind drawn up?" she asked, observing his action. "It is a beautiful bright morning, and it will make your room less gloomy."

But he only shook his head with an air of complete indifference.

"I was sorry to hear you had caught so bad a cold, grandpapa," recommenced Nelly. "How did you manage it?"

"I don't know," said the invalid, languidly.

"You are so used to getting wet when you are out for one of your long walks, that it could scarcely be that," continued the girl. "You don't mind a wetting at all, do you grandpapa? Where do you feel it most—in your throat or your chest?"

He did not answer, and she repeated the question.

"Were you speaking, my dear?" he said at length.

Nelly's patience was nearly exhausted, but she managed to make him understand that she was asking for particulars of his illness.

"I'm sure I don't know," was all the satisfaction she gained from her perseverance, and with a face of alarm she flew down to seek old Aggie in the kitchen.

"Aggie! I am certain that grandpapa is *very ill indeed*. I never saw any one so changed in my life. His skin is as yellow as a guinea, and he doesn't seem to understand anything I say to him. How long has he been like this?"

"He has been ailing on and off ever since you left Bickton, Miss Nelly, and before that too, though you young ones didn't see it. But I don't think he is so very changed in appearance, poor gentleman, as you seem to imagine. You must remember that you haven't seen him for better than three weeks, and we notice a deal after absence that we think little of when it's going on in the same house with us. But your grandpapa *is* ill, Miss

Nelly, as I told you last night, and what's more, it's my belief he'll never be any better."

"Oh! don't say that, nurse!" exclaimed the girl with a look of genuine distress. "What would become of Bertie and me if poor grandpapa was to die and leave us alone? I will write a note to Mr Bumble at once, and when Jem Locke comes round with the milk, you must tell him to take it to Mrs Weston, and ask with my love if she will send it to Cockthorpe for me. I am sure she will if she possibly can."

"And why don't you run up to the farm yourself with it, Miss Nelly? It's a rare fine morning, and I guess Mrs Weston will be longing to have a sight of you, and to hear all you've been about."

For a moment Nelly looked undecided, but then she shook her head.

"No, nurse, don't tempt me; Jem will carry the note quite safely, and there's more than enough to be done in the house as it is. I am sure grandpapa should not be left alone; either you or I must sit in his room. As soon as I have written the note for the doctor, I will go up and see after Bertie and him."

"You've a thought for everybody before yourself," said old Aggie, as she looked after her with an admiring gaze. "Alone, ay? that's what you'll both be before long, sure enough; but whilst there's a bit or a sup remaining, you'll not let the other want, I know."

Nelly wrote her note; let out Thug for a scamper, to accompany him in which, down the dear old nut-walk, was a sore temptation to her; and then, filling her apron with wood and paper, seized a scuttle of coals in the other hand, and proceeded up-stairs to lay and light a fire in her grandfather's bedroom.

"The days are chilly now, Aggie, although they are so bright," she said as she did so, "and I am sure grandpapa will be more comfortable with a good big fire. It will cheer him up, and make the room look less dull."

"Let me do it for him then, my dear," interposed the nurse, trying to wrest the scuttle from her hands; "you'll blacken your fingers so."

"Not a bit of it," said Nelly, successfully resisting the attempt; "you mind your own business, Aggie, and get ready a nice cup of chocolate for him. Why! I wonder how many times in my life before my fingers have been black. But, nurse," as a sense of humour struck her, "only fancy! suppose Aunt Eliza could see me now, what *would* she say?"

And Nelly laughed, although the laugh was turned into a sigh before she was half-way up the stairs, as she remembered how little chance there was of her ever shocking or pleasing "Aunt Eliza" again.

Soon the new-made fire was crackling and burning up the wide chimney of Mr Brooke's old-fashioned grate; and the invalid actually turned his eyes towards the bright flame with something like interest at the unusually cheerful sight and sound which had found its way into his dreary room.

Then Nelly examined both the patient and his bedclothes, and came to the conclusion that a couple more blankets would be very acceptable to him, and that it was absolutely necessary that hot-water bottles were at once applied to his clay-cold feet. When she had flown up and down stairs a few times more, in order to make the necessary arrangements to carry out her design, she asked the old nurse if the cup of chocolate was yet ready.

"It is ready, Miss Nelly, and a nice piece of toast besides; but I'm afraid you won't get him to take it. That's the worst sign about your grandpa, miss, to my mind. He has hardly eaten anything for the last week. However, it won't be wasted, for Master Robert likes a cup of chocolate in the mornings better than tea."

"Does he?" exclaimed Nelly; "then make another, please nurse, for I mean grandpapa to take this one, whether he likes it or no!—I've warmed him *outside*, and this will warm him *inside*, and then, you shall see, he'll be all right again."

"The sight of you is enough to warm any one without fires, my bird," said the old servant, as she prepared the second cup of chocolate according to her young lady's bidding. When it was ready, she placed it on a tray, and went to seek Nelly in her grandfather's bedroom."

"Not that it will be needed for Master Robert," she thought, as she did so; "but Miss Nelly shall drink it instead. I don't see why every one is to be waited on, saving herself."

But what was Aggie's astonishment on getting up-stairs to find that old Mr Brooke had suffered himself to be raised upon his pillows, and had already consumed half of the cup of tempting hot chocolate and several of the thin strips of crisp brown toast, with which his granddaughter had served him.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed old Aggie, as she entered the doorway and set down her tray upon the nearest table from sheer

surprise; here's a transfiguration—I never could have believed it, if I hadn't seen it, not upon a Bible oath."

The room certainly did appear to have undergone a considerable change, although it was but a touch which it had received here and there from Nelly's affectionate fingers. The blind was now drawn completely up, and the October sun, bright but subdued, streamed mildly in at the window, before which had been placed a small table from the sitting-room with a vase of variously-coloured chrysanthemums on it, and a few of the old man's favourite books and fossils. In the grate, the crackling flame had given place to a warm, glowing fire, and, what was of more importance, a faint colour from renewed heat already tinged the face of the dying man. For Mr Brooke was dying, and the two women who tended him knew it, although they had not done more than hint the truth to one another.

Leaving the nurse to attend to her grandfather's wants, Nelly took Bertie's chocolate into his room with her own hands, and waked him from sleep with a warm, loving caress.

The day wore on; but the parish doctor did not make his appearance. Old Mr Brooke, though certainly revived for a time by the prompt attention of his granddaughter, had again sunk into a languid, half-waking, half-sleeping condition, which was evidently begotten of extreme weakness. The afternoon had already reached its prime, when Nelly suddenly entered the dining-room, and addressed her brother—

"Bertie, darling, could you spare me for an hour or two?"

"What for?" he demanded. "You are not going out, Nelly, surely. It is very cold this afternoon; more like December than October."

She walked over to the fire-place, and commenced making up the fire.

"It is cold, darling, and you feel it all the more from taking no exercise. I cannot say I anticipate going out myself, but I think it is necessary. Charley Weston has just brought me a note from his mother. Mr Bumble was out when the messenger reached Cockthorpe this morning, and no one knew where he had gone or how long he would be: they could only promise to give it to him when he returned. But Charley says that Locke is going to drive the tax-cart over to Reddington this afternoon, and if you can spare me, I will get a seat in it as far as Bickton Proper, and go and speak to Mr Ray about grandpapa. I am

really very much frightened about him, Bertie ; I am sure he is very ill indeed ; and so is Aggie."

"I don't believe it," replied her brother ; "a heavy cold always makes a person feel drowsy. And what good can Mr Ray possibly do him ?"

"He will come over here, and talk to him, and comfort him. I am sure he will if he is not otherwise engaged, and you know he is grandpapa's greatest friend."

"And how are you to get back again, Nell ?"

"I shall walk."

"Walk three miles on an afternoon like this ! why, it will be dark before you return."

"So it has often been before, dear Bertie, when necessity has taken me from home. One cannot think of such little things as cold and darkness when sickness is in the case."

He had often and often known her to go on far less important errands for himself, in far worse weather, but Robert Brooke was apt to overlook sacrifices which were made for his own benefit.

"Why can't you go on Mrs Weston's pony—if you must go ?" he next demanded.

"I asked if I could have the pony, but he has gone with the cart for firewood."

"Would not a note to Mr Ray answer all your purpose, Nelly ; Locke could easily leave it at the vicarage."

"I don't think it would, dear, or I should have proposed it. In the first place, Locke does not pass the vicarage—it would be quite a quarter of a mile out of his way ; and secondly, I do not wish to give Mr Ray the trouble of coming here to-night unless he thinks it necessary himself ; and I am afraid I could not explain everything to him in a note as I could by word of mouth : I'd better go and see him. May I not go, darling ? Won't you let me ?" she concluded, as she leaned over her brother's couch, and looked coaxingly in his face.

"I suppose I must, if you are bent on it," he answered, rather sulkily.

"I will not stay a minute longer than is necessary, Bertie. I shall not be gone more than two hours, I hope."

"I think it is rather hard I should have to give you up the very first day," he grumbled.

"Oh, Bertie ! and it is hard to go," she said, flying back to the sofa she had quitted. "But Mr Bumble may not be here, you know, even by to-morrow morning, and the vicar may be

able to tell us what is best to give grandpapa, or to do for him. He is very clever about sickness, and the poor people say they would as soon take his physic as the doctor's. And I would leave you for nothing less, dear, would I?"

And she smiled at him, trying fondly to provoke a smile in return. But in vain; none appeared.

"Well, if you *are* going, you had better go at once," said Robert Brooke. "I hope you'll enjoy a drive in an open tax-cart on a day like this—it's more than I should." And he shrugged his shoulders, expressive of the cold and his wonder at his sister's determination.

But Nelly, sending Charley Weston as an advance messenger to the farm, wrapped herself up as warmly as she could, and ran across the common to her friend's house. The drive in the tax-cart was certainly a very cold one; to say nothing of its being exceedingly dull, for of course Jem Locke was not in a position to speak to the young lady he was driving, unless he was spoken to; and his only idea of politeness was to edge himself as far away from her on the seat as he could, so that there should be no possibility of his velveteen suit coming in contact with her woollen dress. He had received strict orders from his mistress to drive Miss Brooke right up to the vicarage gates; therefore she was spared the quarter-mile which she had intended to walk.

Mr Ray, fortunately, was at home; and his wife and daughters were delighted, as they always were, to see Nelly, and would have kept her at the vicarage for the evening had she not looked alarmed at the mere proposal. But as soon as she had made the state of her grandfather known to him, the vicar expressed his determination to walk back with her to the Farm Cottage at once. He had heard nothing of Mr Brooke's illness; and reproached himself bitterly for having permitted business, during the previous week, to interfere with his usual visit to Little Bickton. He looked very grave as Nelly detailed the old man's symptoms, and said that the doctor had not yet seen him.

"But how is that, Nelly?" he asked, as they walked quickly together in the direction of her home (for the vicar's stable was a very modest one, and he only kept one horse for his own riding). "What were your brother and old Aggie about, not to let Bumble know sooner of your grandfather's illness?"

"I hardly know," replied the girl; "I saw the change in him at the first glance, but Aggie says it would be more apparent to me after an absence than to those who watched him daily. But

she knew that grandpapa was not well, for she told me so as soon as I arrived."

"She waited, I suppose, for the ruling power of the house to return before she ventured to do anything; eh, Nelly?"

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure; but they are very foolish if they wait for me in a case like this—grandpapa might have died before I came back."

"Ah! you should never leave them, Nelly,—that's the truth; the Cottage is like a boat without its rudder when you are away."

"I never wished to go," she replied; "my brother and grandfather settled it all for me."

"And how did you enjoy your visit?"

At this question and several which followed it, poor Nelly was sorely discomfited. She would have dearly liked to have told Mr Ray, who was her earliest friend and teacher, all her perplexity concerning Orpington Chase, and its inmates, and to have asked his advice on the subject, but she dared not, without first consulting Bertie. So her answers were constrained and given with hesitation, and the vicar came to the conclusion that the country girl's visit to her grand relations had been anything but a pleasure to her.

"They looked down upon her, I suppose, poor little soul!" he mused. "Well, it's only a foretaste of what the world will give her by and by."

When they arrived at the Farm Cottage, and Mr Ray had seen his old friend, he liked his appearance so little that he expressed his wish, if they could give him a bed, to remain at Little Bickton all night, or at all events until the doctor had been and given his opinion of the case; and despatched a message to the vicarage to that effect, and a second note to Cockthorpe to urge Mr Bumble at all hazards to come as soon as he received it. He directed Nurse Aggie to feed her sinking master with small portions of arrowroot and brandy whenever she could get it down his throat, and to keep up the animal heat as much as lay in her power. But it was almost too late even for these last offices; no amount of flannel and hot water now appeared capable of restoring the circulation to those death-cold extremities: and the drops of arrowroot and brandy oftener trickled down the outside than the inside of that fixed and passive mouth.

After the first bustle of their arrival, Mr Brooke did not appear to know either Mr Ray or his granddaughter; and by the time that night had again closed in, he did not unclothe his eyes when

spoken to, and his breath could scarcely be discerned with the aid of a looking-glass.

"He is *much* worse since this morning," whispered Nelly in a tone of alarm to the vicar.

"I fear he will not live to see another," was the ominous reply.

Meanwhile old Aggie, having been made cognisant of Mr Ray's opinion of her master's condition, wandered listlessly up and down the staircase, wringing her hands and whimpering, as she thought it right to do, although she did not feel any great concern at the impending event, for "after all," as she said to herself in the kitchen, "'tis only what may be expected when folks have nearly lived to count their ninety year."

And Robert Brooke smoked his pipe in the dining-room, giving it as his opinion that they were making a great fuss about nothing; that in all probability his grandfather would be walking about as well as ever that day week, and it was a great bore that Nelly couldn't sit quietly with him for a minute together, but she must run up-stairs again to ask how the old man was going on.

Yet, long after Robert's pipe had been put out, and he had had his supper and been attended to his bed, and Nurse Aggie, although she professed to keep a watch by her dying master, had sunk back in her cosy arm-chair by the kitchen fire, and fallen fast asleep, Nelly and the vicar sat together in the old man's room, holding a vigil which would have been altogether silent, except for the light sound of the girl's footfall as she occasionally crept up on tiptoe to the side of the bed, or for Mr Ray's whispered inquiry as she returned, "How is he going on?"

The friendly vicar sat on one side of the fireplace with his Bible in his hand, sometimes trying to read a few verses by the dim light of the shaded lamp: oftener gazing thoughtfully into the fire as he mused upon the life which was fast ebbing away without giving a sign that it had any hope of being eternally renewed; whilst Nelly, seated on a stool upon the hearthrug, leaned her head upon her hand and tried to picture the earthly future which was looming for Bertie and herself.

The long night passed at length, and the gray autumn dawn broke coldly. Nelly shuddered as she attempted to build up the waning fire without making a noise, and the vicar rose from his seat and stretched himself silently, and shivered in unison. Then he blew out the candle which burned yellow in the morning light, and stepped up to the bedside, and examined the invalid long and earnestly.

"Shall I warm up the arrowroot again?" asked Nelly, presently. "Do you think it will be of any use?"

He did not answer, but went to the window and pulled up the blind in the sick man's face.

"Will not that disturb him?" inquired the girl, anxiously. "I wish the doctor would come—how is he going on, Mr Ray?"

He was not going on at all. He was gone!

Robert Brooke did not awake that morning till after his usual time. He yawned and turned himself in his bed, until he was so fully roused that he felt certain it must be past his hour of rising, and rang his bell impatiently, to ask the reason of the delay in his sister's appearance.

She answered the summons at once, with eyes that bore evidence of weeping, but with the same sweet smile on her mouth with which she always welcomed her brother.

"Can't I have my tea, Nell?" he inquired, with an air of injury.

"Yes, dear! of course—directly. I had not forgotten it—but poor grandpapa"—

"What of him—is he worse?"

"Oh, Bertie!" she exclaimed, with her arms about her brother's neck, "he is dead—he died this morning, and we have only each other, darling, to love and live for now! But I wish," added Nelly,—her thoughts naturally falling back into the channel which they had occupied for the last two hours,—“I do wish he had seen the doctor first.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

NIGEL BROOKE WRITES A LETTER TO HIS COUSIN.

It was on a Tuesday evening that Nelly had returned to her home. Old Mr Brooke died on the Thursday morning, and the vicar remained at the Farm Cottage, with the brother and sister, until the doctor had called and given his opinion respecting the cause of their grandfather's death. Mr Bumble was a cheery, rosy little man, who had slapped Nelly and Robert as often as he had kissed them, and given them sugar-plums with one hand while he pulled out their teeth with the other. But he had always taken a sincere interest in the twin children and their grandfather, as did every one who knew them, and he was greatly shocked and annoyed, on arriving at Little Bickton that morning at nine o'clock, to find there was no longer any need for his advice or services.

"It was not my fault, I can assure you," he said apologetically to Mr Ray, who met him with the news. "I was called out fifteen miles the other side of Cockthorpe, yesterday morning, to a premature labour; and I had two messengers sent after me before I could leave that place, to summon me to a couple more cases of the same description going on in my own village. It's always the way with women; they are the most provoking creatures in the world: as soon as one of them falls ill, every female in the same condition follows suit. I never come in from a labour but I expect to hear that the cat's kitted during my absence, and the dog has got another litter of puppies. But, God bless my soul, sir! this has been very sudden, surely; very sudden, indeed. I never entered my own house from the time I left it till this morning, and the first thing I saw was your note, and that of Miss Nelly; and I just swallowed a mouthful of breakfast, and was off again immediately. But I had no idea it was so serious as this. How long had the poor old gentleman been ill? What has Miss Nelly been about not to send for me before?"

"Nelly has been away from home," replied the vicar, "and the boy is, as you know, rather careless on such points, and I fancy that the old woman is getting past her work. It is an unfortunate thing that it should have happened just when the girl was absent. The only fact of any consequence, which I can gather concerning Mr Brooke's illness, is, that he appears to have caught a violent cold when the weather changed about a fortnight since, and that after a few days he took to his bed and gradually sunk. But no one seems to have thought him seriously ill until Nelly returned and saw him."

"Ah! I understand," said the doctor, significantly; "inflammation of the bronchial tubes, and rapid decrease of the vital power in consequence—it's a common cause of death in old people: I daresay I could not have prolonged his life beyond a few days, even had I been called in at once; but that is no excuse for the neglect—no excuse whatever."

On viewing the corpse, Mr Bumble saw no reason to alter his opinion; and after Mr Ray had said a few affectionate words of comfort to Nelly and her brother, he left the cottage in company with the doctor, promising to see them again on the following Sunday, when he would make all the necessary arrangements for the interment.

Consequently, for the next two days the orphans were left

alone, and very sad days they were, at least for one of them. Dull and monotonous they must have been in any case, but since the conversation which they had held on the night of her return, there had sprung up a slight barrier to that perfect sympathy which hitherto had existed between Nelly and her brother, which, without decreasing her idolatrous love for Bertie, had power to mar the pleasure of their intercourse. During the short period of her grandfather's illness, she had not had time to give more than a passing shudder to the dreadful history she had then learned, or a regret to the coming quarrel which she saw her brother was determined to have with Nigel Brooke. But, now that the motive for action was withdrawn, and there was nothing to do but to sit beside Bertie's couch in the darkened room, her first opinion regarding what he had told her returned in full force.

It was not that Nelly thought less than Robert did of the terrible way by which their father had met his death ; on the contrary, her feminine nature recoiled from the mere mention of blood ; and she was fully aware that the fact that Nigel's parent had shed that of hers, must and ought to make a difference in the intercourse between their children. Whether this necessity would blight her future happiness, the girl as yet knew too little of her own heart to stop, or wish to stop to inquire. What most troubled her affectionate nature was that Bertie should act ungratefully, and wish to make her appear to do the same, towards the people who had been kind to both of them. It might not have been judicious or right of her Cousin Nigel, under the circumstances, to attempt to renew a connexion which had been dissolved for years ; but Nelly was sure that he had done it for the best, that he had wished to do them good and not evil, by coming down to Little Bickton, and inviting them to Orpington Chase. She did not desire, or, at least, she knew that she ought not to desire (which seemed all the same thing), to hold any further communication with her aunt and cousin ; but she did wish (and in this she felt there could be no wrong) that the resolution at which Bertie and she had arrived might be told them with as little offence as possible.

She had little, during these two days, to divert her mind from this topic. Her friend Mrs Weston would have been only too pleased to have come and spent part of that lonely time with her young favourite ; but although she loved Nelly dearly, there had always existed a species of silent antagonism between Robert

Brooke and the mistress of the Farm, and she feared lest an offer which the sister might have gratefully accepted would be resented by the brother as an act of interference. So she contented herself with writing Nelly little sympathetic notes, which Charley daily delivered, and in which she earnestly begged her to let her know if there was anything in which she could be of use to her in the present emergency.

Nelly answered the notes kindly, denying the want of any assistance, and then returned to her seat beside her brother's sofa, to ponder in what words she could best bring him round to think about Nigel Brooke as she did herself. She was no coward; with all her sweetness of disposition and fear to offend those she loved, she was brave where the truth was concerned, and she would rather have made Bertie angry than have permitted him without remonstrance to act in a manner which was unbecoming. Many people in this world get the credit of having very sweet dispositions, because they are simply too indolent or too craven to stand up for the right when they both know and see it.

Nelly Brooke was not one of these; had she been, the whole tenor of her life would have been changed. Her spirit was naturally high, and her soul rebelled against anything which was unjust or ungenerous. She could see her own faults and those of others plainly enough, and the reason why she succumbed in everything to a brother so infinitely inferior to herself, was because her overwhelming love, whilst it could not entirely blind her to his failings, made her willing to bear all things from him and for him.

Love ruled her spirit, and through love Bertie ruled herself; and a few months back she would probably have submitted without a murmur to his decree touching her future treatment of her aunt and cousin.

But, for the first time in her life, there was rising in her heart (though unconfessed) a tiny rival in her affection for her brother, and the infant feeling had sufficient strength to cast out fear.

And so, as time went on, and no mention was made of the necessity of letting Nigel Brooke know of his grandfather's death, Nelly determined that she would remonstrate with Robert, however cross he might be with her, before she let him offer such an indignity to one who was now the head of the family, as to permit him to learn the news from a foreign source. An opportunity for broaching the subject soon presented itself to her, for on the Saturday morning old Aggie put a letter into her hands,

in the address of which she had no difficulty in recognising the bold, firm writing of her Cousin Nigel. It was dated from London, and had been written two days previously.

“MY DEAR COUSIN NELLY,—I only waited in Hilstone long enough to see Pinner return, and to hear the news that she had safely started you on your road to Little Bickton, before I came up to town to see about Bertie’s Bath chair. I hope that the fly did not break down before it reached the Farm Cottage; but if it did, I am quite sure that your loving little self would have walked all the rest of the way, and felt no fatigue until you were in Bertie’s arms again. However, doubtless before this you have sent my mother the whole account of your journey, and I shall hear it from her on my return. I trust you found your grandfather better, and that he will soon be well enough to spare you to come back and pay the Chase another visit, and bring Bertie with you. The little gray will fall sick else, for want of exercise, for no one is to be allowed to ride him until you return. I call him ‘Miss Nelly’s horse’ now, and have told the groom to get him a new set of clothing for the winter, that he may not disgrace his mistress. But I am forgetting the chair, which is really a great beauty, and which started by rail for Reddington to-day. I could not ascertain at this end by what means it is to be transported from Reddington to Bickton, or I should have given orders for its being forwarded; but doubtless there is a carrier between the places who will call for it if you desire him to do so. Give it, with my love, to Bertie, and tell him I trust it may afford him a few, if not many pleasant hours. I think he will approve of it. It is like the one lined with blue cloth which you so much admired the day we lunched at Dr Monkton’s, and has a hood and glasses to shut down in front in case of rain. Let me know of its safe arrival. I had it carefully packed, and hope it will not get scratched in the transit.

“Good-bye, my dear Nelly, with love to you all, not forgetting Aggie and Thug.—Believe me, your affectionate cousin,

“NIGEL BROOKE.”

On the perusal of this letter, so friendly and informal, Nelly reddened with alternate pain and pleasure. Her heart melted at the knowledge of her cousin’s promptitude and generosity, and at the thought that it must all be wasted: but it quailed at the remembrance of what Bertie had said, that he would try by his

presents to pay them for their father's blood. Had Nelly been a coward, she would have thrust away this letter or destroyed it, or at all events delayed the confession that she had received it until a few days later. She might easily have done either of the three, for it had arrived early in the morning, and before Bertie had risen from his bed. But her justice told her that, in whatever spirit, it should be answered; and with the intention of urging that fact upon his consideration, she carried it straight into her brother's room.

"Bertie, I have just received this letter from Nigel Brooke; it concerns you more than myself: shall I read it to you?"

"No! put in the fire: I have no wish to hear it!"

"But you must hear it, darling," she said firmly, as she seated herself on the edge of the bed; "it is a letter which requires an answer, and deserves one."

And without further parley she read it aloud from beginning to end, during which proceeding her brother made no remark.

"Now, Bertie, what answer am I to send?" she asked, as she refolded the paper.

"I will have no answer sent at all."

"But the Bath chair will be at Reddington by this time, Bertie, and we must take some notice of its arrival: such a beautiful chair, too (if it is like the one he mentions) with the easiest springs and cushions, and all lined with cloth: it cost forty-five guineas, I know, at the very least; and if you choose, you can unscrew the handle, and fix in shafts for a pony or donkey. It was just the thing for you, Bertie, and it would be such a comfort: and it must be lying at the station at Reddington now."

"Let it lie there, then!" he said, angrily; "it shall rot there before I will lift a finger towards its removal. Have I not told you already, Nelly, that I will accept nothing from the hands of this man, and neither shall you."

"But surely I must let him know of your determination, Bertie. You see that this letter was written in perfect ignorance of your feelings respecting him."

"Not of your own, I suppose?" said Robert, sneeringly.

"Of *our* feelings, darling, I meant," replied Nelly, reddening under the inference. "You know we always think together, and I trust it will never be otherwise; but it would be worse than ungracious, it would be really unfair, not to let Nigel Brooke know that we have no intention of using his gift. We must give

him the option of sending for it again, Bertie: it is too valuable a thing to be left to spoil unclaimed at a railway station."

"He has no lack of money," said her brother, curtly. "He can well afford the loss."

"But, dearest, if you do not wish to make use of it yourself," she continued, but stopped short on seeing Robert rise into a sitting posture on the bed.

"Do you want to keep up a correspondence with this man?" he asked, eyeing her suspiciously, whilst his lips turned pale with passion.

The idea that had once before crossed his mind that his cousin might take a fancy to his sister returned upon it in that moment.

"You don't mean to tell me," he added, quickly, "that he has had the shame, the audacity to make love to you?" but the look of offended pride which Nelly turned upon him forbade his continuation of the subject.

"You needn't look at me in that way, Nell," he said, more quietly; "I hardly supposed he had; but why do you think it necessary to plead his cause in this fashion? Do you wish me to accept his gift—the mere offer of which I now feel to be an insult—and to say 'thank you,' to him prettily, and to remember each time I use it that it is a love token from the son of my father's murderer? You seem to me to think vastly little of what I told you the other night. What right has that fellow to address you in those familiar terms, or indeed to address you at all? You appear altogether to overlook the fact, that at the time Nigel Brooke visited us, and extracted a promise from me that you should go to Orpington, he was cognisant of what we have only just learned. He had no right, being in possession of the truth, to take that promise from me. I consider that he inveigled you to the Chase under false pretences, and were he to enter here this moment, I should have no hesitation in telling him so. Notwithstanding his fine speeches, he looks down upon us like the rest of the world, and thinks, I suppose, that anything from *his* hand is good enough to throw to such paupers as we are. But I'll have none of his charity or his commiseration, and he shall find that out before long," and seizing the letter which his sister held in her hand, he tore it into pieces, and passionately threw it away.

Nelly's blue eyes had opened wider and wider with astonishment as her brother proceeded with this outburst; but at his last assertion, which she knew to be so utterly unfounded, and the

violent act which accompanied it, the surprise in her face faded away, and gave place to a look of indignation.

"For shame, Bertie," she said, warmly. "You are very unjust. Nigel Brooke has given neither of us any cause to say that he looks down upon us. Besides, why should he? and what do you mean by saying 'like the rest of the world?' We are very poor, I know, but that is no reason we should be despised."

At these words her brother appeared to think he had made a mistake, for he coloured as he replied—

"*You* may consider it no reason, Nelly, but the longer you live, the more you will be convinced that it is. However, Mr Nigel Brooke shall not be the one to give you your first lesson. No wonder we never heard his name mentioned before we saw him! My only surprise now is, how my grandfather could ever have given him permission to enter these doors. If he hadn't been an old fool, he"——

"Oh! hush, hush, darling," cried Nelly, no less shocked than alarmed at her brother's continued vehemence, for agitation was at all times hurtful to him, "remember that he lies dead in the next room to us, and, poor old man, I daresay he did it for the best. We are commanded to forgive, Bertie, as we hope to be forgiven."

"I shall never be forgiven at that rate," he muttered, sinking down again upon his pillows.

"Yes, you will, dear; you will come, some day, to see all things in a different light. Meanwhile, don't think I desire to oppose your wishes, Bertie, in any way. I never have yet, you know, and it is not likely I should begin now. Not that I think you are acting right or fairly in this matter, but"——

"I don't care what you think," he interposed, rudely.

"But as a question of business. Is it not your part to let Nigel Brooke know of poor grandpapa's death? He was his grandfather, remember, as well as ours."

"It is nothing to me whose grandfather he was," replied her brother. "Nigel Brooke doesn't hear it from me."

"Then may I not write a little note, Bertie," she said, persuasively, "not to Cousin Nigel, but only to Aunt Eliza, just to tell her the bare fact of grandpapa's death and the resolution to which we have come, and nothing more? You can read it, darling, of course, and see all that I say, and I will make it as cold and formal as you please," and she twined her arms about Bertie's neck, and laid her soft cheek coaxingly against his own. But he

shook her off with a denial and an oath, such as she had seldom heard from his lips before. Nelly was frightened, not so much at her brother's violence as at what it might portend. A vague dread began to assail her mind. For the first time in her life she asked her heart if it were possible that there could ever be less love between Bertie and herself than had existed since their infancy; less perfect sympathy between her soul and the twin soul (so much dearer to her than her own) which had left heaven at one breath together.

"Oh, God forbid it!" she cried, when she had regained the sanctuary of her own room. "Anything but that, anything in the world rather than coldness, or distrust, or blame, should come between my darling and myself."

So nothing more was said at that time about the letter or about the words which it had caused; though all Nelly's affectionate assiduity failed to rouse her brother from the sullen silence into which he fell after their discussion of the morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

AND RECEIVES A GRATEFUL ANSWER.

ON the following day, however, which was Sunday, the subject was renewed, though not between themselves. It was the turn for afternoon church at Little Bickton, and when the service was over, Mr Ray walked into the dining-room at the Farm Cottage, where he found the twins sitting together in the dusk and talking by the firelight.

The vicar had kindly taken it upon himself to make all the necessary arrangements for Mr Brooke's funeral; not only because he was an old friend of the family, and knew Robert to be too helpless to take any part in business, but because he was aware of the contents of the will of their late grandfather, and that he had been named guardian to the brother and sister, in case of their not being of age at the time of the old man's death. He now came to inform them that he had fixed the funeral to take place on the following Wednesday, and that all that was needful should be ready by the same time.

"You are so kind to us, Mr Ray," said Nelly, placing her little hand in the vicar's; "I don't know what we should have done without you."

"Don't begin to praise me too soon, Nelly," he replied, smiling;

"you don't know how stern I can be when I choose ; perhaps you are not aware that your poor grandfather has named me in his will as your guardian."

"Has he ? I am so glad," she said, quietly, leaving her hand in his. Though, had there been a better light in the room than that afforded by the fire, it would have been seen that Bertie's features did not show the same contentment at the news that hers did.

"Besides," continued Mr Ray, "I have not done everything for you, Nelly, as you seem to imagine. There is still much to employ both Robert and yourself, and there will be still more after the funeral. You must let your friends know of the date on which it is fixed to take place. Of course you have already apprised your cousin, Mr Nigel Brooke, of his grandfather's death ?"

He glanced towards both the young people as he put the question, but neither of them answered. Robert kept his sullen eyes fixed upon the fire, and Nelly's cheeks grew hot, and she dared not raise her face.

"Have you yet heard from your cousin, Robert ?" then inquired the vicar, addressing the boy more particularly. "Will he be down to the funeral ?"

"I don't know," replied Robert Brooke.

But Nelly could not bear an evasion, even from her brother, and she added softly, "We have not told him of it, Mr Ray."

"Not told him of it !" echoed the vicar, in his astonishment ; "why, my dear children, what have you been thinking about ?—here is Sunday already, and no post out until to-morrow afternoon. Did you forget it, Robert ?"

"No ! I did not forget it," was the unwilling reply.

Mr Ray was annoyed at the boy's uncommunicative manner, and when he next spoke, it was, for him, rather sharply—

"Then you have been very wrong to neglect such a duty ; for Mr Nigel Brooke is the first person who should have been informed of the event. I doubt now whether a letter will reach him in time. The idea of the funeral taking place without the presence of the head of the family ! It is extremely irregular ; he ought to be the chief mourner."

"I daresay it will take place just as well without him," said Robert Brooke.

But Mr Ray could not forget the negligence of which, as he imagined, the brother and sister had been guilty, and reverted to

it several times during the remainder of his visit. When he rose to go, he said to Robert—

“You will be sure and write to your cousin to-morrow, if you please, and beg him, if possible, to be here by Wednesday. I wish now we could put it off till Thursday, but I am afraid we shall not be able to do so, as the men come from Reddington. If you cannot write yourself, Robert, mind that your sister does so. Nelly ! I depend upon you that this is not forgotten again.”

Robert Brooke grumbled out something in reply to this friendly injunction, but it appeared so unsatisfactory to the vicar, that when he had gained the dark passage, whither Nelly had followed to help him on with his greatcoat, he turned towards her, and searchingly asked—

“Nelly, my dear, will Robert write that letter to your cousin ?”

She answered him in so low a tone, and with so much trepidation in her voice, that his suspicions of something wrong were confirmed.

“I don’t know, Mr Ray—indeed I don’t know, but I hope he will.”

“But what makes your brother so unwilling, Nelly ? Is it obstinacy, or does he dislike his cousin ? Some one must write, and if he does not, I will,”

“Oh ! I wish you would, Mr Ray,” she whispered, anxiously. “I am afraid Bertie won’t ; and that’s the truth. There’s a quarrel between them ; not exactly a quarrel, though—a kind of misunderstanding—and I fear it will never be set straight. It is not right, is it, to be hard and unforgiving, and especially at a time like this ?”

“It is never right, my dear child ; it is wrong at all times ; and in this case, as far as I can see, it is absurd and most impolitic. But cannot you write to your cousin, since Robert will not ?”

“He won’t let me,” she answered, in the same low voice, “and I can’t vex him, Mr Ray—I would rather do anything than vex him.”

“You spoil him altogether, Nelly,” said the vicar ; “however, I will write myself. Let me see, what is the address—Orpington, Somerset, is it not ? It would be of little use speaking to your brother now ; I can see he is in no fit state to be argued with ; but if Mr Brooke cannot attend the funeral (which I fear is impossible), he will be sure to come to Bickton afterwards, and then I will inquire more particularly into the quarrel, and see that matters are explained between them.”

And without waiting for Nelly's thanks, Mr Ray hurried out of the front door into the fog and mist of the autumn evening.

The vicar's communication left Bickton Proper on the Monday afternoon, and did not reach the Chase until the same time on Wednesday, for it was two days' post between the two places.

Mrs Brooke, who was daily expecting her son back from London, tossed the letter on one side amongst several others which were awaiting his return, and was startled by the exclamation which burst from his lips as he opened it, sitting by her side on the following day.

He had not been home many minutes, but she had already treated him to a dissertation upon the wicked ingratitude of her late guest, in not having written to properly announce her arrival at Little Bickton, or to thank them for the hospitality she had experienced at the Chase ; and had been considerably nettled by Nigel attempting to excuse his cousin's apparent neglect, on the supposition that her grandfather's illness might be more serious than she had anticipated, and have fully occupied her time.

"Nonsense ! I don't believe it in the least," Mrs Brooke was in the act of saying ; "I always thought there was something sly and artful about that girl ; she made so many professions"——when she was interrupted by her son holding up an envelope for her inspection, as he exclaimed——

"Good gracious, mother ! when did this arrive ?"

Mrs Brooke did not at all like being disturbed in the midst of her speech, and she answered in a tone of offence——

"I am sure I do not know, Nigel : yesterday afternoon, most likely, or the day before, but Henderson can tell you better than myself. Why, is it of importance to ascertain ?"

"Because it is from the clergyman at Bickton, and contains an explanation of poor Nelly's misdemeanours. He tells me that my grandfather died last Thursday, and was to be buried yesterday ; so perhaps you'll forgive the poor child for not writing now. But, only fancy my not being at the funeral. I am so sorry ; I wish I had been at home when this arrived."

"You could not have reached there in time, if you had been," replied his mother, without expressing the least concern at the news, "so it is just as well you were not. It was a wretched day, and those country churchyards are the most dreadful places for catching cold. Shall we have to go into mourning, Nigel?"

He looked at her with disgusted surprise.

"Of course we shall ; what are you thinking of ? Not only

ourselves, but the whole household : do you forget he was your husband's father? And please, see about it at once, for I shall go to Bickton myself to-morrow, and probably bring back my cousins with me !”

At this intelligence Mrs Brooke looked aghast, but after the discussions which she and her son had already held on the subject, she dared to do no more than look. All she ventured to remark was—

“ You cannot possibly go to-morrow, Nigel, because you have arranged to meet Mr Pooley here on Saturday.”

This was true, and, moreover, Mr Pooley was a man of business connected with the house at Calcutta, for Nigel Brooke to speak with whom at that particular juncture was of the utmost importance to the firm. Remembering which, he admitted at once the necessity of the delay, but chafed under it much more than his mother liked to see.

“ So I have !” he exclaimed, in a tone of annoyance, “ and I cannot put him off either, or I would write and do so by to-night's post. I could run down to Bickton by the last train on Saturday, after I have spoken to Pooley, but I particularly asked him to stay with us until Monday, and it won't do to offend him. How extremely annoying—I would give a hundred pounds it should not have happened so.”

“ I really think you are making rather too much of it,” said Mrs Brooke. “ The funeral is over, you see, and it is not your fault that you did not attend it. You can write to the parson, and to your cousins, if you think it necessary, and tell them so ; and appoint a time to visit them next week. Your presence there now can be of no use, and might be thought an intrusion.”

“ I am not afraid of that,” replied Nigel, “ but I cannot bear to think of those poor children left there by themselves. I want to hear what the will said, too, and how my grandfather has left them ; they may be penniless for aught I know ; and lamenting together over their prospects, not half believing all that I have said respecting my desire and ability to help them.”

“ You can surely communicate your disinterested intentions by letter, Nigel, as effectually as by word of mouth. I have no doubt that your cousins (from what I have seen at least of Helena's disposition) will be ready enough both to believe and accept them.”

“ So I will,” he answered, as, roused by her sarcastic tone, and the slur cast on poor Nelly, he rose to leave the room ; “ I will

write at once, and assure Robert and his sister that I am ready to share my fortune with them to the last penny."

Full of this generous intention, Nigel Brooke penned a letter to his cousin Robert, in which, after expressing his regret at not having seen his grandfather again, or even been able to pay him the last respect of being present at his funeral, he proceeded to offer him and his sister all that he had told his mother he should do. He gave him his reasons for not being able to go to Little Bickton till the following week: asked him to appoint the day most convenient to themselves for receiving him there, and begged him, if in want of money before that time, to draw on himself to any amount. He trusted that both he and Nelly would thenceforward look upon him as their elder brother and best friend, and concluded his letter in these words—

"Were all the circumstances of our lives, my dear Robert, as fully known to you as some day they must be, you would acknowledge that I, of all men, have the best right to offer you assistance, and you to accept it from me."

It was a letter calculated to melt the heart, and soften the rancour of most people, even had the writer been a personal enemy, and it reached the one to whom it was addressed at a moment when he should have been most open to conviction.

It reached Robert Brooke so short a time after the earth had closed over the last survivor of the principal actors in the great quarrel of which he chose to call himself the avenger, that he might have consented, without any great humiliation in his own eyes, to bury the hatchet with his grandfather. But his mind had sunk into so morbid a state, that the reception of Nigel's letter only seemed to have the effect of hardening him. He chose to mistake the offers of kindness which it contained for charity: the expressions of sympathy for pity; and the insolent pride of his warped understanding prompted him to make a bitter requital for his cousin's generosity.

He never showed Nelly this letter, and although she knew that he had received it, their last words upon the subject of Nigel Brooke and the cutting suspicion by which Robert had then wounded her sensibility by ascribing her interest to a warmer feeling, were fresh in her memory, and her pride forbade her to revive anything so unpleasant.

Knowing how much kindness the writer had always expressed towards them both, she guessed what the letter contained, and trusted that Bertie's good sense and good feeling (in which she,

of all the world, alone believed) would lead him to answer it as he should.

But she trusted too much.

The youth sat down with a pen dipped in gall, and obeying no dictates but such as the obstinate enmity he had conceived for Nigel Brooke dictated to him, wrote back such a reply as no *man* would have dared to send another.

It was a letter so utterly unjust, so insolent and defiant, that it needed to be seen to be believed. In it he recapitulated all that he had said to Nelly, with the addition of much which he had purposely avoided telling her; he informed his cousin that he knew all; accused him of attempting to deceive and wishing to insult them; and told him that if he ever presumed to offer them money and presents again, he would find both flung back into his face.

He heaped abuse upon the memory of his dead uncle and grandfather, and finished by desiring never to meet his correspondent again in terms such as few men could forgive or overlook.

It was not only the letter of a headstrong and irascible boy, although the writer might well have been termed such; but it contained so much bitter truth mixed up with its exaggerated grandiloquence, that it became too serious a matter to be passed over with a mere smile of contempt.

CHAPTER XX.

NELLY AND BERTIE ARE LEFT TO THEMSELVES.

WHEN Robert Brooke had finished the composition of this letter, he took good care that it should not meet his sister's eye. He was afraid of Nelly,—afraid, not of her angry remonstrance or blame, but of her coaxing caresses and tearful persuasion. So he bribed a little village boy to carry it to the post-office; and never even mentioned the fact of its having been written. But Nelly knew all about it just as well as he did, and giving her brother credit for a virtue which he did not possess, ascribed his reticence on the subject to the fact that the letter he had received had altered his opinion concerning his cousin, and that he was shy of confessing so sudden a change of mind even to herself.

His answer reached Nigel Brooke just as he was making preparations for starting on his journey to Little Bickton. To accurately describe the effect which it had upon him, glowing as he

was with the most ardent generosity, is next to impossible. Iced water poured, without warning, on a heated and feverish frame is the nearest simile which physical nature can produce. At first, he could scarcely believe but that his eyes were playing him false, but when, after many a persual, he was convinced it was no trick that had been served him, his spirit shudderingly recoiled from the ingratitude contained in every line. For a moment he asked himself if it were possible that Nelly, who looked so innocent, and appeared so affectionate and true, could be accessory to such a cruel insult, but in the next he had acquitted her. He thought he had reason to believe that she would be averse to any tenderer attentions from himself than such as a cousin might offer, but he could not distrust the guilelessness of the nature which she had so frankly displayed to him, or believe her capable of countenancing any unworthy method of rejecting the friendly aid which he had proffered her brother.

And then, after the first shock and disappointment were over, the natural sequence to such feelings under such circumstances set in, and Nigel Brooke grew terribly angry; he forgot how often he had himself maintained that the brother and sister had more reason to shrink from than cultivate his acquaintance; he forgot that if his own sense of the injury his father had inflicted on them was deep, theirs must needs be much deeper; every one is thus apt to forget his former assertions and resolutions when he is wounded to the quick. Right and wrong seemed suddenly to change places in his opinion as he gazed on the written insult which Robert Brooke had sent him.

It would have been hard to bear such truths from any one with equanimity, but it became doubly so when they proceeded from the lips of a mere lad, whom he had designed to lift from a lowly and obscure position to one of luxury, if not distinction. His offer had been, indeed, as his cousin expressed it, flung back in his face again, and with a violence which almost stunned him. "Who is this insolent boy, after all," he angrily asked himself, "that I should care two straws whether he lives and dies at the expense of his parish or not? My sense of honour and duty must really be as chimeric as my mother tells me, if an ignorant youth like this can see through the vain absurdity of my offers, and threaten to strike me in return. I will concern myself no longer about either of them. From this hour we will remain as unknown to each other as we were three months ago."

But even whilst this thought passed through the mind of Nigel

Brooke, he knew that it could not be. He knew, let others scoff as they would, that he had voluntarily imposed a sacred duty upon himself, and that no ingratitude, or insult, or rebuff could justify him to his own conscience in altogether deserting his orphan cousins. He remembered that he had registered an oath before high Heaven, that as long as he lived neither Robert or Helena should ever want a friend in time of need ; and he felt that that time, sooner or later, must come. As Nigel Brooke recalled this, all that was best and loftiest in his noble nature came back to his aid, and the anger, of which the wayward epistle before him was really unworthy, dispersed before it like the morning dew. He rose from his seat (he had been alone when he received the letter), and wiping off the cold sweat which passion had caused to gather on his brow, felt that his better self had conquered, and that he could treat Robert Brooke's insulting missive with the contempt which it deserved.

"After all, I am certain Nelly has had nothing to do with this," so ran his thoughts, "and I could not be so ungenerous as to let her suffer for her brother's faults. She will have enough to bear, as it is, poor dear child ! Ah ! if I had been but a few years younger ; but I have made a vow not to think of that again. It is just as well I saw no more of her, for this business would have put a stop to it, if nothing else had ;" and with a deep sigh Nigel Brooke resumed his seat, and began to consider what was the best step for him to take in the matter. But the first thing he did was to tear Robert's letter into fragments and throw them into the fire.

"I am not likely to forget it," he thought, as he moodily watched them burn ; "but I will not keep it before me as a constant reminder of the lad's folly. He will come to see it in that light himself before long, and then he will be thankful to learn that I destroyed the mad effusion the same day I received it." His next idea was, not to postpone his contemplated journey, but to go to Bickton Proper, and speak to the vicar about his cousin's extraordinary behaviour. But a few minutes' consideration made him reject this project as useless. Nothing that Mr Ray could say to convince Robert Brooke of his want of reason in attempting to visit the sins of the father upon the son could undo the insult which he had voluntarily written. He might yield to persuasion so far as making an unwilling and humiliating apology for his rudeness was concerned, but such a concession was not what Nigel required. He had wished and asked for the free and confiding

affection of both his young cousins, and it had been refused him, on the part at least of one of them, with so much contempt and abuse, that a formal reparation, founded on no conviction of the injustice of such a proceeding, could never heal the wound which it had inflicted.

Besides, Nigel Brooke was not aware if the vicar of Bickton knew of the cause for quarrel between Robert and himself. He thought most probably that he did not, for he had written to him simply in the character of a friend of his late grandfather, and the stories discreditable to the fame of a family are usually the last to be discussed beyond its immediate circle. All that he did know concerning Mr Ray was, that by old Mr Brooke's will he had been nominated guardian to the brother and sister, for Robert had mentioned this circumstance in his letter, adding, as proof that they needed neither protection nor assistance at their cousin's hands, that by the same will Nelly and he had been left very comfortably off, and were perfectly able to maintain themselves.

To seek an interview with Robert Brooke after the indignity which his father's name and his own had so lately suffered at his hands, was out of the question. Nigel was ready enough to forgive his cousin, but he felt that when a reconciliation took place between them, the first advances must come from the other side. Whenever the hand of friendship was extended, however late, however unwillingly, he would not be slow to accept it. Meanwhile, the only course to be pursued, consistent with his dignity, was to hold aloof from the inmates of the Farm Cottage.

And he hardly knew what he could say on the subject, even to Mr Ray. The vicar might be, probably was, a most estimable man, but he was a stranger to him, and without entering into all the miserable and disgraceful details of the case, it was impossible that Nigel Brooke should make him understand how far his cousin Robert was justified, not only in rejecting his offered kindness, but in insulting him into the bargain. And this he had no intention of doing. He sickened to recall the rude handling which his father's misdeeds had already undergone in the letter, the contents of which, though now reduced to a few white ashes in the grate, were still vividly impressed upon his mind; and he resolved, that since no discussion could do away with the fact of their committal, or the consequences they had left behind them, he would thenceforth preserve a filial silence on the subject. The only conclusion at which he arrived was, that he could do no

better than rest quiet until the following morning, before which time he should have decided in what terms to address the guardian of his cousins.

But when, at length, after much thought and battling with himself, Nigel Brooke rose to leave the study, his face was so pale from the annoyance he had passed through, that his mother at once noticed the alteration in his appearance.

"Good gracious, Nigel!" she exclaimed, as he entered her presence, "what have you been doing to yourself? Are you ill?"

"No! do I look so?" he inquired, with a ghastly smile.

"Look so! I should think you did. Why, you are as white as a ghost."

"I have a headache," he said, wearily; "I have had much to worry me this afternoon, and I feel tired."

"Nothing wrong in Calcutta, I hope, is there, Nigel?" asked Mrs Brooke, anxiously, as her son threw himself into a chair.

"Nothing in the world, mother; in fact, the house is in a more flourishing state than usual."

"Then what has annoyed you? Do you still intend to go to Bickton by the early train? You had better put off your journey for a day or two, if you do not feel well."

"I intend to put it off, mother. I think it is not improbable that I may do so altogether. I find that my grandfather has appointed a guardian for my cousins in the person of the vicar of the parish, Mr Ray, the same gentleman who wrote to me to announce the death; and he appears quite capable of doing all that is required in looking after their interests."

"You have heard from Bickton, then. Which of them wrote, the brother or Helena? I think it is most extraordinary that I have not received a letter from that girl! How has the old man left them off?"

"Very comfortably—so Robert writes—and quite independent; but he does not mention if they will continue to live in the Farm Cottage or not." As Nigel said this he tried to speak unconcernedly, but the sound of his voice betrayed that he was acting.

"You are keeping something from me," said Mrs Brooke, curiously; "there is more in the letter than that. What answer do your cousins send to your grand offer of sharing house and home with them?"

"Why, what answer could they send?" he said, with a careless laugh, as he attempted to evade her question. But the next moment he felt it would be useless to try to do so. Before long,

his mother must learn the decision to which Robert Brooke had arrived, and it was not worth his while even temporarily to deceive her. She would be sure to speak her mind about it at any time, and he might as well hear all she had to say at once, and have it over.

And so, changing his tone to one more serious, he continued—

“It is vain to attempt to hide anything from you, mother : it is true that there was a great deal more in my cousin’s letter, and much to vex me. He must be a very headstrong and unthinking lad, or he would not venture to commit his first impulse to paper, as he evidently has done.”

Mrs Brooke laid down her work upon her lap, and extended her hand.

“Let me see the letter,” she said, eagerly. But her son only smiled at her in a curious manner in reply.

“Let me read it, won’t you ?” she repeated ; and then he said—

“It is out of my power, for I have already destroyed it.”

“Then I am sure it must have been something *very bad indeed!*” exclaimed his mother, with an air of disappointment, as she returned to her employment, “if you could not even show it to me. What did the boy say ? He surely does not think little of the offer you made him ?”

“So little, mother, that he refuses it altogether both for Nelly and himself. He rejects both my assistance and my friendship ; and can you guess for what reason ?”

At this intelligence Mrs Brooke was secretly overjoyed, for the thought that her son might bring both his cousins to live at the Chase had been a sore trouble to her. She had no more desire now to receive Helena than she had Robert. The flimsy enthusiasm which she had conceived for the girl when she found she was useful to her, had all evaporated directly she had occasion to fear that she might prove a rival in the affection of her son. Mrs Brooke wished Nigel to marry ; but not to fall in love. Many mothers advocate the one idea who cannot bear even the thought of the other. And she had dreaded the return of Nelly to the Chase, and the love scenes which she foresaw would ensue, and the thought that the little country-girl would be mistress then, and her crippled brother a life-pensioner on Nigel’s bounty, and she—herself—would be nothing ! So she was greatly pleased to learn that there was the prospect of a coolness between her son and Robert Brooke ; and though she had grown too politic to show her pleasure openly, there was an expression of content

mingled with the serious look which she immediately affected, which did not escape the notice of the man who sat opposite to her.

"Can you guess for what reason?" were the last words which Nigel had addressed to his mother, and as he pronounced them he looked her in the face.

It had been part of Mrs Brooke's later scheme to magnify rather than ignore the cause of quarrel between her husband and his father, and maintain that it was an insuperable barrier to anything like a thought of marriage between the cousins. So, true to the line of argument which for convenience sake she had temporarily adopted she would not permit herself to express any curiosity at her son's question, but languidly replied—

"For *which* reason, you should rather say, Nigel. No, I really cannot. There are dozens, as I have always maintained, against anything like an intimacy between ourselves and that unfortunate branch of the family."

Her son's lip curled visibly.

"You have a wonderful facility for changing your opinions, mother; one for which, at this moment, I could almost envy you. I wish I could forget some of my own as easily! My cousin's avowed reason for refusing to accept any assistance at my hands is, because my father's were stained with his father's blood. He has learnt his own history, and this is the result."

"And a very proper result, too," affirmed Mrs Brooke. "I did not give the young man credit for so much sense and right feeling. There is no doubt that the unfortunate circumstances under which his father met his death *ought* to make a complete gulf between you; it is not natural that you should be friendly together, and I don't think that the world would think it decent."

"Hang 'the world!'" was the quick rejoinder. "Do you mean to tell me that that fact is to raise up so high a barrier between my cousins and myself that we shall never be able to grasp hands over it?—that because the fathers sinned against each other, the children are to carry on the feud, and that we are to be strangers from generation to generation?"

Here Nigel Brooke left his seat, and, as he hurriedly paced the floor, continued—

"No! I do not believe in such a creed, and I will not sanction it. If Robert chooses to think so, and time does not open his eyes to the folly of which he is guilty, I suppose that our future intercourse must, of necessity, be limited; but my opinions are unchangeable, and whenever he alters his, he shall not find me

backward in fulfilling the promises I have made him. If not for his own sake, I would do it for Nelly's, and my dead father's."

"Well, I think you are perfectly infatuated, Nigel, as I have often told you before," replied his mother. "It was all well enough, perhaps, when the young people were willing to carry out your design, but now that they have insulted you by actually refusing your friendship, I think you might hold yourself higher than"——

"Don't say *they*, mother," he exclaimed, interrupting her; "this letter is Robert's work; Nelly has had nothing to do with it, of that I am assured."

"Of course you are if you wish to be," replied Mrs Brooke, with a sneer, "but that is no proof of the assertion. You have always said yourself that Helena is everything to her brother; that she can advise, or direct, or persuade him, as she will, and yet you consider it likely that he would write an important letter like that without her knowledge. The idea is absurd. If the boy knows his own history, you may be sure the girl knows it too, and it is not one calculated to please a woman, I suppose, more than a man. Depend on it that Helena wrote that letter. I do not mean with her own hand, but that her brother wrote it from her dictation; and, in my opinion, it is no more than you need have expected."

"I never thought of that," said Nigel, arresting his footsteps for a moment, whilst a look of keen distress passed over his face. "I hope she didn't. But, no! I won't believe it! Nelly is too amiable to cherish any such vindictive feelings as that letter displayed; still less to counsel their being written with the purpose of wounding one who has been kind to her."

His mother smiled incredulously.

"Believe and hope what you choose, my dear Nigel; but I fancy I know a little more about Miss Helena's amiability than you do. It is very easy to appear amiable when you are pleased; but I have always thought there was something very strange and underhand about the sudden manner in which she left us, and the excuses she made, and"——

"Mother, pray let us talk no more upon this subject," said Nigel, moving towards the door. "I daresay I may never see Nelly again, but I will not believe that she is anything but what is perfectly sincere; and if I did," he added, in rather a lower tone, "I would not hear it, even from you."

This suspicion of his mother's had the power to wound him deeply, for a doubt of his girl-cousin seemed to him worse to

bear than all that had gone before it ; not because he entertained any hope of winning her love, or even of having the opportunity of trying to do so ; but simply because he had considered her the freshest and most innocent creature that had ever crossed his path, and he could not bear to part with his ideal. The next morning's post took his letter to the vicar of Bickton. It was curt and formal, but, after a long night of painful consideration, Nigel could think of no means by which to make it otherwise. After thanking Mr Ray for letting him know of his grandfather's death, and detailing his reasons for not having been present at the funeral, he went on to state that, as he concluded the vicar was aware of the sentiments which his cousin, Mr Robert Brooke, had expressed towards himself, he would not be surprised at his declining to visit Little Bickton, now that the occasion for his presence was over. But as he understood that Mr Ray had been legally appointed guardian to his cousins, and that, as head of the family, he considered himself naturally so, he trusted that the vicar would let him know should any occasion arise for which his assistance might be required for them, and would not be refused. Which, being followed by a few commonplace civilities, closed the epistle.

It reached Mr Ray at a time when he was anxiously expecting to hear from this rich cousin of his orphan wards ; for having been told of his grand promises on their behalf by the late Mr Brooke, he waited to know what intentions he might have regarding them, before he bestirred himself to make any arrangements for the future.

When Robert Brooke had written that his sister and himself were left comfortably off, and needed assistance from no one, his pride had led him to greatly exaggerate the truth. His grandfather had had nothing to bequeath them beyond a couple of thousands in the funds, which produced an income of about seventy pounds a year for their mutual support.

The cottage in which they had lived had not even been his own, although the furniture was ; and poorly as the twins had been fed, and clothed, and educated, the necessity of doing so had made many a hole, since their birth, in the old man's principal.

But there were still some years of the lease under which Mr Brooke had rented the Farm Cottage to run, and as soon as Mr Ray thought it advisable that they should try and dispose of it, the Westons came forward with an offer which seemed as though it would suit all parties.

Mr Weston's eldest son, James, who was engaged to be married, had been trying for some time to get a house near his father's farm, in which he held an interest, and the cottage was said to be the very thing he wanted.

"And then, as he would take his brother Tom to live with him," Mrs Weston eagerly explained to the vicar, "I could let Nelly and Mr Robert have the three rooms which the young men used to occupy at the other side of the Farm. They are part of the old house, you may remember; and are divided from the kitchen and parlour by a passage, so that they can be quite private if they wish it. Nelly could put her own furniture in there, and Aggie would, of course, have every use of my kitchen. And as to the rent, Mr Ray," said the kind matron, whilst a tear twinkled in her eye, "I don't think either Mr Weston or myself are likely to come down very hard upon such young creatures, left alone in the world."

For since, up to that period, nothing had been seen of the rich cousin from Orpington, and neither Nelly nor her brother would give any reason for his non-appearance, it had already begun to be indignantly rumoured about Little Bickton, that his grand promises had all been moonshine, and that the orphans were to be left to depend on themselves.

"I am sure of that, Mrs Weston," replied the vicar; "and if nothing turns up to prevent it, I do not see, since they refuse to take up their abode at the vicarage, that Robert and Helena could do better than accept your kind proposal."

The something floating in Mr Ray's brain as likely to "turn up," was, of course, an offer on the part of Nigel Brooke to provide a home for his orphan cousins, for this parley took place before his letter had been received.

The vicar had suggested that, in case of their remaining in Bickton, the twins should go and live with himself, but Robert had emphatically refused to be dependent on any one, and notwithstanding his sincere desire to act generously towards the grandchildren of his deceased friend, Mr Ray thought of his own large family, small house, and limited income, and was very thankful that his offer had been declined.

As soon as Nigel's letter arrived, the vicar carried it over to the Farm Cottage, and in his capacity of guardian begged Robert Brooke to afford him an explanation of its contents.

Then ensued a somewhat stormy scene, during which Nelly learned for the first time of the correspondence between her

brother and cousin, and its results. It was in vain that Mr Ray argued and remonstrated ; he had no authority to do more, and nothing that he could say had power to shake the young man's dogged resolution, or to cause his opinion to swerve one inch towards his guardian's. The whole miserable history of the duel and its consequence (which it appeared the vicar had known for years) was recapitulated, and various dark hints were thrown out respecting some other mystery which Nelly could not understand, but the mere allusion to which made her brother's brow lower and his fist clench.

She was a passive hearer and spectator of all this ; she could not lift her voice against Bertie's argument, and in favour of the descendant of the man who had so cruelly slain her father ; especially since the one was poor and had no one to love him but herself, and the other was rich and surrounded by friends and luxury. She could not know in what bitter language Bertie had insulted his cousin before he called forth that cold refusal to see them again which the vicar held in his hand. She had thought her cousin Nigel would have been more generous and forgiving, but whether disappointed in this particular or not, it mattered little ; there was but one course open to her for the future—to cling to her brother.

What could she say when appealed to by her guardian to reason with Bertie on the folly and ingratitude of his conduct, but that, whether right or wrong, she must abide by his opinion ?

What could she do when Bertie himself, enraged by the continued discussion and her silent disapprobation of his sentiments, dared her to choose at once between him and his wealthy cousin, who would doubtless dress and feed her as well as his mother's lady's-maid if she asked for it humbly, but throw herself into his arms and beg him, in a voice choked with tears, never again to speak of her preferring any one before himself ?

When the vicar rose to leave the brother and sister on that occasion, he had come to the conclusion that the sooner he saw their furniture moved into Mrs Weston's rooms, and themselves comfortably settled there, the better. He wrote a short answer back to Nigel Brooke, in which he informed him that, having had an interview with his wards concerning the letter which he had the honour to receive from him, and found that they were as resolute as himself in desiring that no further communication should take place between Orpington Chase and Bickton, he supposed there was nothing more to be done but to thank Mr Brooke

for his offers of assistance, and to express regret that anything unpleasant should have occurred between his young relations and himself.

It was a very polite note, and intended to be harmless, but it terribly upset Nigel Brooke,—absurdly so, indeed, when the tenor of its predecessor is taken into consideration. The use of the pronoun “they,” which the writer had so naturally adopted, was sufficient effectually to destroy the rest of his correspondent for many nights after he had first seen it stare upon him from the paper.

It was true then—his mother’s surmise was correct ; and Nelly had closed her warm heart against him as soon as ever she heard the story of his father’s error. But though the knowledge affected him more deeply than all that had preceded it, it could not make Nigel think less of the girl with whom he had passed so many pleasant hours—with whom (he could not help confessing it) it would have been better if he had never met.

It made the crime of his father’s revengeful act swell in magnitude, and assume more glaring colours than it had done before, for how great (he argued) must it have appeared in that poor child’s eyes, if the mere recital could at once change all her feelings towards those whom she had been ready to love.

But Nelly’s self did not suffer for what her supposed resolution cost her cousin. Unconsciously, he had set up her image on the highest pedestal of his heart, and Nigel Brooke’s nature was of that lofty kind that nothing his idol could thereafter do would depose her from her place. He might mourn, in her, the fallacy of human nature, but she would still remain for him the most worshipful of created beings : for he was a man to love once and for ever. But the pain which he experienced at the reception of the vicar’s letter containing that obnoxious pronoun, was not sufficient enlightenment to make him seriously own that his affections were entangled by the attractive qualities of his little country-bred cousin. He knew that he had been on the brink of danger ; but as yet he believed that the pain he felt in parting with her, however sharp, would prove as brief as their intimacy had been. So he only said to himself with a sigh—

“I suppose it was inevitable that estrangement should arise between me and that man’s children, and it has only happened a little sooner than it would otherwise have done. And if I had gone on associating with Nelly much longer, there might have been great sorrow in parting for both of us. How the dear little

girl blushed the last evening she was here, when I questioned her as to what answer she should give if a man as old as I am asked her to be his wife. My wife!—that fresh, wondering-eyed creature! The world would laugh I suppose, and justly, at the idea of such a marriage. Well, my oath remains, whatever has passed away, and I feel it as binding on me now as when I took it." And then he added, slowly and musingly—"Poor little Nelly, fancy our not meeting again! Well," rousing himself with an effort, as he experienced an unaccountable burning sensation rising behind his eyeballs, "God bless her sunny face, wherever it be, and help me to forget it as best I may."

And, at the same hour, in that far-off country village, Nelly was doing the only thing for those who had been kind to her, which she felt she could do without violating the sacred duty she owed her brother.

She was kneeling with folded hands beside her simple bed, and praying for her aunt and for her cousin Nigel.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW THEY LIVED AT BICKTON FARM.

THE house which belonged to Bickton Farm had been built at two separate periods. The old building had been both picturesque and solid, with gabled eaves and Gothic casements, and deep window-sills of oak, dark with age and polished with use, each one of which served both as a seat and a chest for storing books or linen.

The new portion, which had been added within the past fifty years, was equally substantial perhaps, but far less interesting in appearance. Its rooms were lighter and loftier than those of the old farm-house had been, but they had no ceilings raftered with dark wood like the ceiling of a chapel, or wainscotings which reached half-way up the wall, and were surmounted by an old-fashioned chintz paper which had been varnished until its pattern was hardly distinguishable. Its chimneys, perhaps, were less liable to smoke, and its grates were more modern and convenient; but it possessed no narrow mantelpieces, six feet from the flooring, with wide sides, which, although they had received many a sacrilegious coat of paint, were yet carved from top to base.

When the first building was about to be pulled down, it had been decided that three of its rooms were too perfect to be

destroyed, and therefore, as they lay to the back of the site whereon the new house was to be erected, they were permitted to stand, and were connected with the more modern part by a long covered passage. Notwithstanding which, they were almost like a separate dwelling, for they had a door for private egress, and fronted the sunniest side, looking out upon the only piece of flower-garden which the Farm possessed. These were the rooms that the farmer's "boys" had hitherto occupied, and of which they had sadly complained, as being dark and gloomy and cold ; and these were the rooms which Mr Weston now offered, at a nominal rent, as the future abode of Robert and Nelly Brooke.

The brother, at first, was greatly opposed to the idea ; he "hated" the Westons, and the rooms were "poky and inconvenient," and he would live in no one's house but his own. But after much gentle reasoning and persuasion, and when he had convinced himself that it was quite necessary they should let the Farm Cottage, and there was no other place in Little Bickton for them to go to, he permitted his sister to accept Mrs Weston's offer—although he never ceased grumbling at their mutual ill-fortune in being obliged to do so. During these cheerless days, and the many cheerless days which followed them, Nelly, mentally and physically, worked like a little slave. She ran backwards and forwards from the Farm to the Cottage twenty times a day, and never returned without a large market-basket heavily laden with all the smaller necessities of a household. One hour she would be seated on the ground, laboriously stitching together the carpets, to make them fit the larger rooms ; the next, on her knees, nailing them down, or perilously perched on the top of a pair of steps while she hung up the curtains which were to keep the draught from Bertie's sofa. Then she would fly back to the Cottage to sit for an hour by his side, not to rest herself, but only to coax him into permitting her to leave him with a better grace for the afternoon. Except for such assistance as Mrs Weston or her red-elbowed maids could occasionally give her, she was all alone in her labours ; for if old Aggie had been less feeble than she was, some one would still have been required to attend to Bertie's multifarious wants. And then, when Nelly, after a long day of contrivance and arrangement, would return, utterly weary, to her tea at the Cottage, there was her brother to talk to and amuse for the rest of the evening, and to wait upon until he chose to go to bed, which was generally not until twelve or one o'clock. Yet for all that, she did not forget or omit a

single thing for his comfort, before she allowed him to move from the Cottage to the Farm. On the evening on which the flitting was accomplished, she had everything ready for his use before she went over, in Mrs Weston's pony-chaise, to fetch him to his new abode, and when, supported by her arm, he entered the old-fashioned parlour, he was saluted by such an air of home that he almost forgot to grumble, as he was fully prepared to do. The substantial, though faded curtains, were carefully drawn across the embrasured windows; a huge log burnt cheerfully in the wide fireplace, and his own sofa, which he had resigned but half-an-hour before, was already waiting him, placed close to a cosy tea-table.

"Come! this is better than I expected!" he graciously said; and the remark was all the thanks for her trouble which Nelly required. When he retired that night to his bedroom, which adjoined the parlour, Robert found everything just as comfortably settled for his use. All the best and most convenient articles of furniture had been moved into his room; and the easiest mattresses, and the thickest blankets, and the warmest curtains, had found a resting-place there. He was pleased with his sister's forethought and care for him; he kissed her more than once, and declared she was a "darling," and his "own Nelly;" and if it were not for her, he should wish himself dead a thousand times over; and she drank in his praises, sweeter to her than from any other mouth, and was perfectly content. It was moments like these that atoned to her for the sacrifice of her life.

Of what consequence was it that her bedroom, which separated from his by a short passage and a dip of three steps, was the most draughty and ungenial apartment of the three; that it possessed no fireplace, and that she had not had time to do more than order the furniture which was not required for the other rooms to be piled in it anyhow, so that she could hardly find space to move, far less wash and dress herself with comfort? Bertie sank in the depths of his feather-bed, and, with a bright fire burning within a few feet of him, slept none the worse for all this, and why should she?

Though nurse Aggie, who occupied a small bed in the corner of her mistress's room (another uncomfortable arrangement, for Nelly had hitherto always enjoyed the luxury of privacy), was not disposed to take things quite so quietly as her young lady. The poor old woman having already twice stumbled over the steps which led into the room, was not in the most amiable temper in

consequence, and when Nelly retired to bed she found her indignant at the disorder of the apartment.

"It's just like you, Miss Nelly," she exclaimed, "to have all the rubbidge of the house brought into your own room; and whatever them wenches of Mrs Weston's have been about not to help you a little with things, I can't think. Why here's three wash-stands, and four tables, and all the kitchen chairs, 'eaped anyhow, to say nothing of crockery. I've put it as straight as I can, but I'm sure when I first come in 'twas a difficulty to turn oneself, for the room ain't any larger than it need be, and without a fireplace too. It strike like a cellar."

Nelly was very weary, and a little out of spirits, and she could not quite stand being thus taken to task by the old servant. So she answered rather sharply—

"Well, there was nowhere else to put the things, and so it can't be helped. If it is uncomfortable, nurse, I have to bear it as well as you, and if you were half as tired as I am, you would be thankful to lie down anywhere, and not think twice of the disorder of your room."

It was seldom that Aggie heard her nursling speak to her in such a tone. Nelly's temper was usually so equal that the old woman occasionally found herself adopting the general custom, and treating her with less consideration than was her due; but one quick word or reproachful look was always sufficient to bring her back to a sense of her duty, and in the present instance she was out of bed before her mistress's sentence was concluded.

"In course, my dearie, and I am worse than an old fool to go and vex you with my mawnderings when you have been toiling for every one's good but your own. No, Miss Nelly, dear, I can't, nor I won't go back to my bed, not till I've tucked you up in your'n. I couldn't bide quiet now, and see you a-doing anything for yourself, my bird!"

But it would have been well for Nelly Brooke if her first day at Bickton Farm, however full of annoyance or fatigue, had been her worst.

It was the dullest of November weather when they settled there, and the girl had need of all her patience, and cheerfulness, and hope, to help her to bear up through the dark months which followed. In the first place, they were very poor. Deducting the expenses of their present rooms, the twins were to receive twenty pounds from James Weston as the rental of the Farm

Cottage ; and ninety pounds a year is not much on which to support three persons. As Nelly was the housekeeper, Mr Ray had spoken more seriously on the subject to her than to her brother. He had explained to her how very limited was their income, and how necessary it was that she should practise strict economy since there was no possible means by which it could be increased. He had bid her divide her ninety pounds by twelve, and then consider how far she could make seven guineas a month go, and resolve that it should never be exceeded. At first Nelly thought that it would be very easy. Seven guineas a month—nearly two pounds a week—seemed ample for the requirements of their simple household. But when she came to try the experiment, she found it very different from what she had anticipated. So many extra wants cropped up of which she had had no idea ; which cost so little, and were absolutely necessary, and yet which ran away with so much of the weekly allowance. There was Bertie's tobacco and beer ; and on occasions, his bottle of brandy. There were the tit-bits without which he could not eat his breakfast or tea ; and there were the advertisements of books or catch-penny toys which caught his eye in the newspapers, and to procure which it seemed hard to refuse him a few shillings. They had not been so badly off in the grandfather's lifetime, because not only had the old man supplied all deficiencies in his exchequer at the end of the year by drawing on his principal, but he had gratefully received the presents which such friends as Mr Ray or the Westons sent him. But Bertie's absurd pride had led him to forbid Nelly to take anything in the shape of eatables from either the farm or the vicarage. He called all kindness, which took the form of help, charity ; and if left to himself, would have indignantly refused it. His sister contrived to reject the many offerings which were sent them without offence, but her house-keeping purse sadly felt the want of them—eggs, and fruit, and vegetables, and home-cured bacon had all to be purchased now, instead of had for a "thank you !" And yet Bertie complained if he were asked to forego any of his accustomed comforts. It was hard for Nelly to be called a "screw," and to be told she must be a "precious bad manager," or to see her brother put out of temper for a whole evening because she had had nothing but bread and butter to set before him at tea.

But it was harder still to come to the end of her seven guineas before the month was up, and to be obliged to take "just a very little" out of the next month's allowance, and then to find the

impossibility of making up for it by economising any more than she had done before.

Yet these troubles alone would not have been sufficient to cause Nelly's figure, as the months went on, to lose much of its plumpness, or her step to become less light, and her voice lower and more subdued. She had a sharper pain to contend with than the pain of refusing to provide Bertie with money for unnecessary purposes, and a more wearing anxiety than the fear that, during the ensuing month, she should have to go without butter to her bread or sugar in her tea. And this trouble was also connected with her brother.

Robert Brooke, who had exhibited from his infancy, a sullen and exacting disposition, had become subject, since his grandfather's death and the quarrel with his cousin Nigel, to fits of gloomy despondency, which were of sufficient frequency and duration to alarm his loving sister.

Sometimes he would be for days like his former self, that is, he was neither very agreeable nor disagreeable—(he was always selfish in the eyes of every one but Nelly); but at others—and these occurred the oftener of the two—he would lie for the same time without uttering a word of his own accord, and occasionally refusing to answer even when addressed. At such periods he would take advantage of his sister's anxious solicitude on his behalf, to wound her feelings in every possible way; he would seek the most roundabout methods by which to pick a quarrel with her; and when, having borne with his wayward temper as long and patiently as she could, her broken spirits would find relief in tears, he was always ready to call her “mealy-mouthed” and “hypocritical,” and to say she “got up” her emotion for the purpose of exciting the sympathy of “that old fool, Aggie,” and “those interfering brutes, the Westons.”

Then, a day or two after, perhaps, when the black mood had passed, and peace was restored between them, Bertie would hide his face on Nelly's bosom, and shed real tears, and call himself by such dreadful names, whilst he exalted her virtues to the skies, that his penitence was more painful for her to witness than his temper had been. But after they had kissed and cried over each other, and had mutually sworn never to quarrel more (although the poor girl had little cause to reproach herself in this respect), Bertie would brighten up wonderfully, and in a few hours would be himself again, and as selfish as ever.

If he had permitted Nelly at this time to have other com-

panions than himself, so that she might occasionally have had a little change, the burden would not have fallen so heavily upon her. But this was what he would not do. Young Mrs Weston from the Farm Cottage, who was a rosy, cheerful girl of about one-and-twenty, and who had left several sisters behind her in the Sussex homestead from which she came, would have been delighted sometimes to slip away from James and Tom, and to spend an afternoon with Miss Brooke up at the Farm; and the vicar's daughters, who thought nothing of the distance by which the houses were divided, would have been equally pleased to visit Nelly, or to have her to stay with them.

Such companions would have done the girl good, and have preserved her young life fresh in her. But though they were all fond of Nelly, Robert Brooke was a favourite with none of them.

The young ladies from the vicarage declared they were afraid to encounter him without the protection of either their father or mother; and when Alice Weston's smiling face presented itself for admittance at the portals of their door, it was generally met for welcome by a scowl sufficient to drive a less timid visitor away. Robert would not hear of his sister again leaving home, nor did she wish to do so; but he was not pleased when she absented herself even for a simple walk, and he was too unsociable in his bearing towards those who would have sought her company to make it worth their while to cross his threshold, so that Nelly was reduced to his companionship alone.

She was even cut off from enjoying in any great degree the society of her old friend, Mrs Weston, and to see whom daily had been her favourite anticipation in moving from the Cottage to the Farm.

What long afternoons had Nelly pictured, passed in the pleasant sitting-room which Mrs Weston usually occupied! What uninterrupted lessons on the piano, or readings from their favourite authors! What cosy evenings, when the kind old farmer would come in and take a hand at whist, and lose his six-pences to Bertie and herself! But Bertie had never been sociable with any of the Westons, and now he seemed less disposed to be so than ever. He did not positively object to his sister spending an hour or two in their company, but he steadfastly refused to have his couch wheeled into the farm parlour; and he was always so gloomy and out of temper when she returned thence, and to see him with a lowering brow pained Nelly so much, that she would have sacrificed any pleasure to prevent it. So that, by little and

little, she quite gave up going to sit with Mrs Weston, or asking her to bring her work into their room ; and a few words of greeting exchanged as they passed through the kitchen, or met in the garden, was all the intercourse which now took place between the matron of the Farm and her young friend.

But Mrs Weston had insisted upon doing one service for Nelly, about which she consulted neither the brother nor sister, and that was to have her own pianoforte placed in their apartment. It was in vain they remonstrated with her, and affirmed it was impossible they could take advantage of her kindness : Mrs Weston refused to have the instrument moved back again. She even went so far as to declare that they would be doing her a favour by letting it stand there ; that it was seldom used, took up too much room in the parlour, and required a warmer situation to keep it in order.

It was a jangled, worn-out old piano, which many people could not have listened to without having their teeth set on edge, but it was a never-failing source of amusement to poor little Nelly. Hour after hour would she sit at it with one of Mrs Weston's ancient music-books spread before her, whilst she patiently picked out, more from ear than knowledge, the old-fashioned tunes and ditties which it contained.

But Nelly's love of music was genuine, her touch was soft and uncertain, and her voice was low and sweet ; and Bertie liked to listen to her trifling in the twilight ; therefore, an Erard and the power to translate Mendelssohn and Beethoven, would hardly have been able to afford her greater satisfaction.

All this time, the subject of Nigel Brooke and Orpington Chase was never mentioned between the twins, still less discussed. At first Nelly had more than once inadvertently alluded to the forbidden topic, but the look with which Bertie had saluted her want of thought, had taught her studiously to avoid it. Mr Ray, as far as he considered necessary, had satisfied Mrs Weston's curiosity with regard to the estrangement between the cousins, and now even he appeared to have forgotten all about it.

Nurse Aggie was much given to lamenting to herself, in an audible tone, over the sudden downfall of her nursling's brilliant prospects, and hinting that she knew Master Robert was at the bottom of it all, and that she had felt it would be so from the very beginning. But though the old woman would have been glad enough to have had Nelly for a listener, and to have confided all her ideas on the past, present and future to her ear,

the girl was too high-minded to discuss in the kitchen what she dared not mention in the parlour. She had been reared in old Aggie's arms, and cradled on her bosom, and loved her as much as it is possible for a grateful child to love its nurse; but she could not condescend to hear one word from her lips which Bertie might not have listened to. So that a total silence was maintained on the subject throughout the household, unless the few minutes when Mrs Weston and old Aggie could get together to lift up their voices and hands in concert, as they secretly bewailed the ill-fortune of their favourite and the delinquencies of her brother, could be termed an infringement of the general rule.

Otherwise, the name of Cousin Nigel (except in Nelly's memory) was utterly tabooed.

CHAPTER XXII.

SOME ONE COMES WITH THE PRIMROSES.

THE winter was past, spring had returned; and when the violets and primroses were gemming every lane and bank in Little Bickton, a break came to the monotony of the brother and sister's life.

It was on a genial day towards the middle of April, that Nelly, fresh from a morning run with Thug, stood before Bertie's couch, laden with a large basket of primroses, while it was hard to say whether her bright face or the delicately-tinted flowers illuminated the old parlour most. But Robert Brooke was not in a mood to admire either. He had been in one of his unhappy tempers for several days past, during which time his sister had been worse than companionless: for association with him under such circumstances was very similar to sitting at table with a corpse for company. As he now lay upon his sofa, he noticed neither the flowers nor Nelly, but kept his blue eyes (so much lighter in colour and shallower in expression than her own) half-closed or fixed upon the opposite wall, whilst his broad white brow, about which the hair was already beginning to grow thin, was contracted as though with pain, and his hands, with interlaced fingers, were closely clasped together. As Nelly looked at him, the constant inward cry of her heart again arose, "Oh! I *wish* he would do something: I wish he had *anything* to do," for she felt that want of occupation was ruining her brother. The many hours which he passed in idleness afforded him so much leisure for brooding

over his real and fancied wrongs, that his life was burning away within him under the continued fever of fretting. But although his looks upon the present occasion were sufficient to daunt the best-intentioned heart, his sister made a bold effort to rouse him, as she always did, however unpleasant the consequences might be to herself.

"Look here, Bertie!" she said, cheerfully, addressing him as though nothing were the matter, as she held her basket of primroses before his eyes; "are they not lovely?" but he only made a gesture of annoyance, and thrust the flowers to one side.

"You *must* look at them, darling," she continued, in the same strain, "for they are such beauties. I am sure you never saw bigger ones; and would you believe it?—Thug and I have only been once round the old nut-walk, and home through the two fields at the back of the Cottage, and we gathered all these on the way. I never saw such a quantity of primroses as there are this year. The place is quite yellow with them."

"You know I hate the smell of primroses," Bertie at last condescended to observe; "you might have brought violets whilst you were about it."

"There were none, dear," she exclaimed. "I searched for them everywhere; but I will go farther from home to-morrow, and try and get you some. The children gathered all within reach. I saw that little monkey, Jemmy Barnes, with quite a large bunch of them, and I asked him to give me a few, but he said he wanted twopence for them, the young rogue. Fancy, twopence for a tea-cupful of purple violets! But they smelt delicious."

"And twopence was too large a sum, I suppose, to spend on *me*," remarked Robert, sarcastically.

A look of pain flitted over Nelly's face.

"Oh, Bertie, darling! how can you say so? but I am obliged to be so careful of every penny. But you *shall* have them," she added, with sudden resolve, as she put down her primroses on the table and prepared to leave the room again. "Come, Thug, old fellow, we'll have another little run together, and I am sure we shall overtake Jemmy, for he was only outside the gate when I spoke to him."

But as she was about to cross the threshold, her progress was arrested by the appearance of one of Mrs Weston's red-cheeked and red-elbowed farm-maidens, who, with floury arms rolled up in her blue checked apron, came to announce that a strange gentleman wanted to speak to Miss Brooke.

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Nelly, changing colour with surprise and another feeling—half hope and half fear—which seemed suddenly to knock against her heart.

"Yes, miss, it's true—and Aggie—she couldn't come to yer, for the bread's just a-rising; and so I leave 'un in the mistress's parlour, and run to tell yer. And please be I to show 'un in here?"

"But a gentleman!—what gentleman?" reiterated Nelly; and as she asked the question she glanced at her brother's face, fearful of what effect the answer might have upon him, for she could think herself of no gentleman but one. Bertie's expression was not promising—he looked very dark, and his mouth was sternly set.

"I know naught about 'un," replied the girl; "he give his name, but I ain't good at remembering forrin names. He come from Reddington, though. Maybe he's a gentleman from one of the shops there."

Nelly breathed again; had the visitor been her cousin, the servant would have had no difficulty in recalling a name with which she was so familiar. Perhaps, after all, it was only some one travelling the country for orders. Her brother also seemed to dismiss the fear which had evidently attacked him; the cloud rolled away from his brow, and his mouth relaxed again.

"What shall I do, Bertie?" next asked Nelly,—“go to the man, or have him in here?”

"Go to him, of course," he answered, decidedly, "and send the fellow about his business; it's only some travelling bagsman. And do take your horrid flowers away with you," he added, as she was about to quit the room; "their smell makes me feel quite sick."

She caught up her basket of primroses, and putting her hair, which had been blown about by the wind, off her face, followed the farm-servant down the whitewashed passage which led to Mrs Weston's sitting-room. Her first idea of the stranger being Nigel Brooke had been so completely dispelled by the maid's assertion that he bore a foreign name, that it would have been quite a shock to her, had she, after all, encountered her cousin. But she could scarcely have felt more surprise than she did when, on turning the handle of the door, she was met by Dr Monkton. Yet, there he was, with his dark eyes and whiskers, and his white teeth, and his faultless attire, sitting on Mrs Weston's horse-hair sofa, and awaiting her presence in uncomfortable state.

"My dear Miss Brooke," he exclaimed, with emphasis, as she advanced to receive him, "I am charmed to meet you again," and he took Nelly's disengaged hand, which was rosy and cold, and stained from picking primroses without gloves, and pressed it in his warm, kidded palm. She was so astonished at his appearance in Bickton, that she could hardly answer him. Her thoughts, which had torn themselves from Orpington Chase, now flew back there with lightning speed.

"Oh! Dr Monkton," she said, anxiously, "there is nothing wrong—is there—at the Chase?"

Her only idea was, that he had been sent to announce bad news. But he looked as surprised at the question as she had done at himself.

"At the Chase?" he echoed; "certainly not,—at least, that I know of; but I have not been there for some time. I thought—I have understood, that is to say—that you have not had much communication with your aunt yourself lately, Miss Brooke."

"No, I have not," she faltered, "at least, *we* have not; some misunderstanding between my brother—or rather—between"—

"I perfectly understand," interposed Dr Monkton, pitying her confusion; "these little *contretemps* are always occurring in families; and I have found it rather difficult to keep on good terms at the Chase myself. Mrs Brooke is a lady of very uncertain temper, and"—

"Do you never see them now, then?" demanded Nelly.

"Well, I can hardly say 'never,' my dear Miss Brooke, but certainly not so often as I used to do. In fact, I have left off attending Mrs Brooke in a professional capacity. But all this time I am keeping you standing. Will you not be seated?"

At this Nelly blushed, remembering what she ought to do if she wished to appear hospitable. The room in which they had met had no fire in it, and the doctor had doubtless come off a long journey, and needed refreshment, yet she dared not invite him to take it, or ask him into their own apartment, without first speaking to Bertie. So she stammered sadly as she replied—

"This is not our own sitting-room; but we have but one, and my brother is such an invalid, that I am afraid I must go and ascertain if he is well enough to see you before I ask you in there."

"It is of no consequence, my dear Miss Brooke—no consequence in the world," said Dr Monkton, as he reseated himself on the unyielding horsehair sofa, and tried to repress a shiver. "But I daresay you will be wondering what has brought me to Bickton.

The fact is, I was summoned to a consultation at your pleasant little town of Reddington yesterday, and had to sleep there, and never having forgotten the very charming day on which you and your aunt honoured me by lunching at Hilstone, I thought I would just come on and have a peep at you. Particularly as I have always felt, since the conversation we had on the subject, a keen desire to make the acquaintance of your brother."

The remembrance of that conversation, and of the hopes it held out of Bertie's cure, now flashed upon Nelly's mind, and tinged her cheeks with crimson.

"Yes," she answered, eagerly, "and I have not forgotten it either, Dr Monkton, nor what you said about him. Oh! I should so much like you to see him and judge for yourself. Would you mind waiting here for one minute, whilst I run and speak to him about it?"

She placed her basket of flowers on the table as she spoke, and looked pleadingly into his face. He had admired her from the first moment he had seen her at Hilstone, but she looked twice as attractive now, with her hair hanging loose about her shoulders, and her simple country frocks and country manners.

He assured her, with his dark eyes fixed upon her face, that he would wait for any number of minutes—for an hour, if she thought fit that he should do so; that he was entirely at her service, but only trusted she would remember that his time was short, and wasted while she absented herself from the room. Nelly did not wait to listen to his compliments; she flew along the whitewashed passage back to Bertie's side, feeling almost confident that in a few minutes she would return to conduct the doctor there. But when the minutes had elapsed many times over, she took her way back with slower steps and downcast eyes, sadly wondering what on earth she should say to Dr Monkton that would not seem impolite, and followed by old Aggie, with the necessary implements for lighting the fire in Mrs Weston's parlour. It was evident that there was no present chance of the visitor finding himself in that of Mr Robert Brooke.

"I fear your brother is not very well this morning," was the doctor's remark, as his practised eye scanned Nelly's troubled face, and guessed the cause.

"No, he is not," she answered, with hesitation; "he has not been himself for several days past. I am afraid he will not be able to see you; and, oh! Dr Monkton," she added, in one of those bursts of genuine frankness which seemed so natural to her,

and rendered her so different from other women, "I know you will think me very rude and inhospitable, but I *can't* ask you to dinner. I would have been glad to do so, for I am sure you would have taken us as we are, and made every allowance for our country way of living; but Bertie is really not well. I think he frets himself ill, for he is always thinking of this quarrel with his cousin. The very sound of Orpington or Hilstone is enough to make him angry. Can you excuse it? After all your politeness to me at Hilstone, and the kind way in which you spoke of Bertie, I feel how rude it must appear. But it is not my fault, and it does make me so uncomfortable." And after this long speech, which she had delivered in breathless haste, Nelly stood heaving and blushing before her visitor as though she expected him to turn upon her as vehemently as her brother had done. But the calm, unexcited voice in which Dr Monkton answered her tended greatly to allay her fear.

"My dear Miss Brooke, not the slightest apology is needed, I can assure you. I should have liked to make your brother's acquaintance, and do not despair of doing so yet; but as to dining with you, much as I should have enjoyed it, it would have been quite out of the question, as I have ordered a late dinner for this evening at Reddington, and I never touch anything in the middle of the day; and as I wish to see a little of this part of the country, I shall seize the opportunity of your dinner-hour to take a stroll round about. But let me see," drawing out his watch, "it is now close upon one o'clock, probably not far from the time itself?"

"We usually dine at half-past one," said Nelly, answering his look of inquiry.

"Well, then, I shall take my leave for the present, and come again by-and-by. Meanwhile, if you can persuade your brother to see me on my return, I hope it may be for his advantage. Tell him, Miss Brooke, that although I come from Hilstone, I have no connexion now with Orpington Chase, and perhaps that fact may make him a little more reconciled to seeing me. And if he and you can agree to give me a cup of tea before I return to Reddington, at about five o'clock, I shall be very grateful and very thirsty, I have no doubt." And with a laugh, Dr Monkton took up his hat and left the house, and Nelly had nothing more to do but to return to her brother's side. As she did so, her spirits were at their lowest ebb, for as soon as Bertie had heard *who* it was that desired to make his acquaintance, he had become

so vehement, so abusive, in fact, not only of Dr Monkton for daring to appear in Little Bickton, but of herself for having been the means of his coming there, that she had no hope of being able to persuade him to receive the visitor on his return. All that she dared look forward to, was being permitted to give the doctor his cup of tea in Mrs Weston's parlour, and to dispatch him on his way back to Hilstone with a fervent wish that he might never show his face there again. But she was greatly disappointed; for Dr Monkton's appearance had revived all her fond dreams of a cure for Bertie, and to let him leave Bickton without seeing her brother seemed like deliberately thrusting Providence on one side.

Yet none of these sorrowful feelings were depicted on her face as she waited upon Bertie at the simple meal which shortly followed. She was not lively, perhaps, but she was certainly cheerful, or tried to appear so, and her assiduity was the same as usual.

Bertie was in one of his lazy moods that day, which often accompanied his ill-tempered ones, and preferred to lie on the sofa, instead of sitting up at the table, and to have all his food carried to him there. Backwards and forwards tripped Nelly with meat, and pudding, and ready-peeled fruit (for however scanty might be the meal for Aggie and herself, her brother was always sure of having some dainty especially prepared for him), and with each plateful she had a smile for him, or an encouraging word, or a touch so gentle that it amounted to a caress. And meanwhile not one allusion did she make to the untoward event of the morning, or to the unjust manner in which he had visited it upon her unoffending head.

At last Bertie could bear it no longer. The ice within him had been gradually melting for some hours before, and his sister's present forbearance put the finishing touch upon his cure. Each thing with which she served him, he felt less and less inclined to eat, until, as she gave him the fruit, and at the same time laid her kind hand upon his head, his pride gave way all at once, and he seized her fingers, and pressed them against his hot lips.

"Oh! Nelly, Nelly!" he said, as the action brought her round to his side, "why are you so kind to me? What a brute, what a beast I am! Here have I been worrying you for days past, and you have never given me one word of reproach in return. What a darling you are! Why is it that you are so patient and so good, and I am only everything that is bad and worthless?"

"Oh! hush, my dear Bertie!" she said, soothingly, as she laid her cool cheek against his fevered face; "don't say so, dear; don't think so; it is not true!"

"But I must think so," he replied, "as long as I make such a confounded fool of myself. I don't believe it's *me*, Nelly; I believe that I am possessed with a devil, and that he enters into me at these times, and your brother goes away. Can you forgive me, dear, *once* more?"

"There can be no such word as 'forgiveness' between you and me, Bertie!" she fondly whispered. "We are *one*, remember! We could not live without loving one another."

"I wish we were both *dead*!" he muttered in reply. "I often think what a good thing it would be if I just took one of my grandfather's old pistols, or the carving-knife, and put a bullet through your head, Nell, or cut your dear little throat, and made away with myself directly afterwards. There would be an end of misery for us then at all events. I wonder if it would be very wicked!"

But he was startled by the scared face she lifted to his own. Perhaps his unaccountable moods had sometimes made her fear lest his brain should be affected.

"Oh, Bertie! is it really you whom I hear talking in that dreadful manner? Darling, it would be *very* wicked, very wicked indeed! If you were to die, Bertie, I don't think I could stay long after you; but it must be when God will, dear, not when we will."

"But, Nelly! now tell the truth! wouldn't it be a good thing if I were out of your way?" continued her brother, who even in the first moments of his fresh penitence could not resist working a little on her feelings when chance temptingly threw the opportunity in his path. "You know that I am only a burden and a nuisance to you; I worry your life out with my horrid tempers; and I am of no possible use to any one. Wouldn't you be much happier—after a little while I mean—if I were dead?"

But when he saw the look of deep distress with which Nelly heard the question, even his selfish heart regretted having put it. The tears rushed to her eyes, and her lips quivered; but she looked him steadily in the face as she replied—

"Bertie, you are least kind to me when you insult my love by such a question. Oh, my own brother! how can you ask it? Anything, anything sooner than that!"

"Well, but just see how I have bothered you to-day," con-

tinued Bertie, feeling a little ashamed of his former speech. "It isn't your fault that this doctor has followed you from Hilstone, at least I don't suppose it is, and yet I made as much fuss about it as if you had asked him on purpose to annoy me."

[Whenever Robert Brooke's spirit had been newly set free from the demon of temper by which it was so often held in thrall, he was apparently most just in taking all the blame to himself that he could possibly deserve; metaphorically speaking, he gloried in covering his head with ashes, but it was invariably observable that the deeper his voluntary humiliation, the sooner he forgot all about it, and delivered himself up once more to the bondage of evil.]

"I am not *very* much bothered, Bertie," replied Nelly, smiling reassurance on him through her tears, "at least not for myself. I particularly wanted you to see Dr Monkton, because he is the gentleman who spoke so confidently to me, whilst I was at Orpington, of being able to cure you—to make you strong again, dear, only fancy! and able to walk and run about as I do. So, of course, I am disappointed for your sake, but that is all."

"Able to make me strong!" exclaimed Bertie, with suddenly awakened interest. "What! to cure my wretched back? You never told me of this before, Nelly."

"My dear, how could I? Have you not forbidden me to mention anything which took place during my visit to the Chase? But I have never forgotten it. We took luncheon once with Dr Monkton at Hilstone (he is very rich, Bertie, and has such a beautiful house and garden, right in the middle of the town), and he talked to me of you almost all the time, and seemed so interested in all that I told him, and related so many similar cases in which he had effected a complete cure. He is very clever, I believe, and is considered the best doctor in Hilstone."

"But he never could cure me now," said Bertie, musingly, in whose mind the idea of restoration to health seemed to have caused a complete revulsion of feeling towards the obnoxious doctor. "I must be much too far gone for that. Did you tell him that my spine had been weak ever since I was a baby, Nell?"

"I told him everything, Bertie," she replied, delighted at the interest which he evinced; "and Dr Monkton's own words were, that he saw no reason whatever why your health should not be restored, even if your back could not be—be"——

"Made straight again, Nelly. Why are you always so afraid of speaking the truth to me? Well, it would be something to feel

I could walk about like other men, wouldn't it?—and I never expected that any doctor could do as much as that for me. I wonder if this fellow Monkton is a humbug or not?"

"Oh! I am *sure* he is not," said poor Nelly, fully believing what she wished to believe; "and Bertie," she added, timidly, "if it will make any difference to you to know it—and I think it will—he told me to tell you that he had no connexion whatever now with Orpington Chase. I think from what he said that he and Aunt Eliza must have quarrelled about something; but at all events he is no longer her doctor, and he never goes there now."

"Difference!" exclaimed her brother, in a tone of vexation, "I should think it did; it makes all the difference in the world. Why on earth didn't you tell me so this morning, Nell, instead of letting me send Dr Monkton off in the rude manner I did? You may have done me an irreparable injury. Of course, I thought, coming from Hilstone, that he was a friend of those *grand relations* of ours at Orpington. If I had known this before, I would have seen him directly. I shall never forgive you for not having told me."

"But, Bertie," said Nelly, with sparkling eyes, "he is not gone, my dear; he is coming back this afternoon; and I did not repeat anything rude to him, I only said you were not quite well enough to see him; and he said he hoped you would be better when he returned, and he would come and take a cup of tea with us at five o'clock, if you didn't mind. And will you really see him, darling?—ah! I am so glad."

"See him! of course I will; I should be a fool not to see him," replied Robert Brooke, now thoroughly roused from his morbid humour, and restored to more than ordinary cheerfulness. "You're a brick, Nell, that's what you are. I don't believe any fellow ever had a better sister, or a cleverer one, into the bargain."

"Oh! Bertie, Bertie! the less said about the cleverness the better," she answered, laughing; "but I think I am just clever enough to go and see about tea being ready at the proper time, and so for the present, good-bye to you." And she went singing into the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DR MONKTON'S VISIT AWAKENS BOTH HOPE AND FEAR.

WHEN Dr Monkton, both cold and hungry, turned away from the gates of Bickton Farm to wander about the village till five o'clock, he thought he had done a very foolish thing in going there. It had been quite an unpremeditated freak on his part, for he had been really summoned to a medical consultation at Reddington, as he had informed Nelly, and the idea of visiting her (partly begotten of a pleasant remembrance of the pure, bright face which had greatly taken his fancy at Orpington, and partly of curiosity to learn if all Mrs Brooke had repeated to him concerning the twins were true) had only entered his head upon finding himself there. But he had heard sufficient of Robert Brooke's uncertain temper to make him aware that it was more than likely that he should leave Bickton without seeing him; and had he done so, in all probability, the brother and sister would never again have been brought in contact with him. But it happened otherwise; for when Dr Monkton rapped a second time for admittance at the Farm, the door was opened to him by old Aggie, who, although she eyed him with a glance of suspicion, at once begged him to follow her to the apartments of her young master and mistress, when he not only found a warm fire ready to welcome him, but a substantial tea-table awaiting his arrival,—a very different reception from what he had anticipated after the inhospitality of the morning. He was at a loss to account for the change, but, as a wise man should do, he took the goods the gods provided him, whilst not a feature betrayed that they were unexpected.

Robert was alone when Dr Monkton was announced (his sister having absented herself for some household purpose), and as his guest entered the room, he essayed to rise from his recumbent position; but this he was not permitted to do. Dr Monkton, perceiving the intention, sprang forward to prevent it.

"Not for the world, my dear Mr Brooke, not for the world," he exclaimed, in the bland, but gently decisive tones which he used to everybody, as he extended his hand to grasp that of the young man, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, which is a pleasure I have long looked forward to; but if I find that my presence causes you in the slightest degree to incommode yourself, I shall run away again directly." And so saying, Dr Monkton, with a smile and a bow, drew a chair close to the invalid's

couch, and, as though he had been his medical adviser for years, proceeded in the most easy and natural manner to inquire how he found himself that afternoon.

"I have not been quite so well as usual lately," replied Robert Brooke, who felt that some apology was needed for his previous behaviour. "I am sorry I could not see you this morning; but at times I especially shrink from encountering strangers. I often have a feeling of shyness in that respect. I suppose it arises from my weak health, and the secluded life which we lead down here."

"Not the slightest doubt of it," said the doctor, who nevertheless had his own ideas on the subject; "and knowing the nature of your complaint, Mr Brooke, I could have told you so much before I saw you. It is only natural in a case like yours, even had there not been a stronger reason. I am afraid you have had cause to dislike the sound of my name, since you probably have only heard it in connexion with that of Orpington."

"I certainly have no reason to like anything which comes from there," said Robert, hardly knowing what answer to make to this direct allusion.

"Nor I," replied the doctor, with ready acquiescence; "but, as perhaps Miss Brooke has informed you, I am no longer on visiting terms at the Chase. Had I been so, I should hardly have ventured to show my face *here*," and he smiled knowingly, as though to intimate that he was well aware of the fact of the quarrel between the relations. "The truth is, that Mrs Brooke, who is a lady of rather—what shall I say?—of rather an excitable disposition, had a quarrel with me—an argument perhaps would be the more correct term—upon a subject not entirely unconnected with yourself and your charming sister, which ended in a complete estrangement between us, and I have never been called in to 'The Chase' since. I have very old-fashioned ideas upon some subjects, Mr Brooke, and where I feel strongly I am apt to speak my mind, which, although not perhaps the most politic proceeding in the world, satisfies my conscience, and therefore satisfies myself. And you have had much to bear with, my dear young friend—much to bear with."

And Dr Monkton lay back in his chair, and threw a seriously compassionate glance upon his "young friend," beneath which Robert Brooke reddened, though not with displeasure.

"Ah! you'd say so if you knew all!" he observed in reply.

"And suppose I *do* know all," said the insinuating doctor.

At this supposition the boy fired up.

"Why, then, Nigel Brooke is a greater scoundrel than I took him for, to discuss so strictly private a matter before strangers. If I had thought," continued Robert, clenching his impotent fist, "that he would have dared to repeat what has passed between us, I would have told him my mind a little more plainly than I have."

"Gently, gently, my dear Mr Robert," said Dr Monkton, laying his small soft hand upon that of the excited lad. "Are we not running on a *little* too fast? I do not think I said anything to lead you to infer that your cousin and I have had any communication on the subject of the difference between you. If I did so, I beg your pardon and his. That I have learned the circumstances of the case is true, but that is due to Mrs Brooke, his mother, who has certainly shown little reserve in mentioning them before me, and thereby exciting all my sympathies on your own behalf. You need have no hesitation in speaking to me about it, for I can assure you beforehand that I have ever held but one opinion on the matter, and that is, that both you and your sister have been cruelly wronged."

Had Dr Monkton not been so ready and bold in bringing forward the names of Nigel Brooke and Orpington Chase, they would probably have not been mentioned at all during his visit to the Farm; for Robert having found, as yet, none amongst his friends to agree with him in the extreme view which he took of his cousin's behaviour, had become rather shy of encountering further opposition by discussing it. To find, therefore, one whose ideas appeared so thoroughly to correspond with his own, was not only a novelty to him, but a most pleasant surprise. There was a fire of resentment against Nigel Brooke always smouldering in his heart, and ready to burst out upon the least occasion; and it was a relief and a comfort to be able to give it vent, without fear of contradiction or reproach. So that in another minute he was busily occupied in informing Dr Monkton of all the principal circumstances (of all, that is, which he had told Nelly) which had engendered the quarrel between himself and his cousin. How Nigel Brooke's father had behaved in the days gone by; how his mother had wished to bestow charity on himself and his sister in return for that injury; how Nigel himself had come, under false pretences, and lured Nelly to Orpington Chase; all the absurd fantasies and imaginations which had crept into the boy's diseased brain, added to much which occurred to

it on the spur of the moment, were recapitulated for the benefit of his new friend, whilst Dr Monkton listened and acquiesced and sympathised ; and, by an occasionally well-directed note of blame or approval, made the simple lad fully believe that the man of the world was entirely on his side, and that he was even a more right-judging and spirited fellow than he had given himself credit for. So that when Nelly, after an unavoidable absence of a quarter of an hour, which (thinking that her brother and his new acquaintance would have so little in common) she had striven as much as possible to abridge, entered the room, she was astonished to find Bertie and the doctor deeply engaged in amicable converse, whilst the former, with a face of fire, argued and animadverted upon the particulars of their family trouble.

At first she could hardly believe her ears ; but then, as the names and subjects which she in her simplicity imagined should have been held sacred from the world, were openly canvassed, her surprise became patent in her face.

"Bertie !" she exclaimed, in a voice of horror, "what *are* you talking of ?"

"Of what Dr Monkton knows as well as we do, Nelly," he replied ; and then turning to the doctor, he continued : "My sister cannot see the justice of my sentiments on this subject, and therefore it has become almost a forbidden one between us. But it is lost time arguing with women, Dr Monkton, as perhaps you don't need me to tell you."

Robert Brooke delivered this last sentence with such an air of bombast and superiority over poor Nelly, consequent on his dwarfed and miserable manhood, that the doctor could hardly refrain from laughing. But he was too politic to betray the inclination, for "*hardly*" often came between him and the expression of his real feelings.

"If not useless, Mr Brooke," he said, as he gallantly rose and offered his own seat for Nelly's accommodation, "it is at all events unnecessary. According to my creed the fairer portions of creation were never intended to trouble their brains with anything so dry as argument ; although for ourselves there is no logic so powerful as their smiles. Your brother has so far honoured me with his confidence, Miss Brooke, that he has spoken openly of his late quarrel with his cousin, but he has told me nothing, I can assure you, but what I had already heard from others."

He had seen at a glance that the girl's mind was troubled at the idea that Robert had been divulging his private affairs to a

stranger, and he was far more anxious to conciliate her than her brother.

"But since the topic is not, and cannot be a pleasant one to you," he continued, with the same intent, "and I am sure that, gathered round this tempting tea-table (to which I am getting quite anxious to be invited), we may find many more genial—suppose we drop it, and take to discussing tea and toast instead. I assure you, Miss Brooke, that I am ready to fulfil my prophecy of this morning, and to be very thirsty indeed; added to which I find I have picked up such an appetite as I little expected, amongst your Kentish hills."

This easy and ready dismissal of a subject which threatened to endanger the general sociability, was calculated to win the sister quite as much as the doctor's former demeanour had won the brother; and created quite a diversion in the opposite direction.

Nelly's attention was immediately engaged with the cares of hospitality. Robert declaring that their visitor had done him more good than any quantity of medicine, insisted upon sitting up to the table, where Dr Monkton, joining them and keeping their thoughts occupied with all the news of the great world from which they were shut out, caused them to spend a pleasanter and more cheerful hour than they had done for many months past.

They could not help liking their new friend, he entered so cordially into each subject that was started; he appeared so interested in everything they had to tell him; and opposed so heartily any confession of ignorance or rusticity on their own part. What the world called ignorance, he affirmed was generally simplicity of thought and action; the mind enlarged far more readily beneath the pure sky of the country, than amid the smoky atmosphere of a town, and only needed a finishing touch from art to render complete what nature had matured. He spoke to them of London and its varied pleasures and excitements; and when Robert said, with a sigh, that he supposed neither Nelly nor himself were ever likely to see the place, Dr Monkton quite laughed at the absurdity of such a notion; and clapping the poor young fellow on the shoulders, bid him remember that his life and the world were all before him, where to choose, and that it lay with a man to make his own destiny.

Nelly stared at this address, for she knew that her brother's infirmity, to say nothing of his want of education, must for ever preclude his admittance to any of those paths by which the strong and energetic toil on to fortune; but the doctor seemed so much

in earnest, that she did not like to spoil the effect of his eloquence by reminding him of what he appeared to have overlooked. Robert, on the contrary, though quite as well aware as his sister that he was totally unfit for work, and probably would not have chosen to attempt it, if he had not been, was delighted that the truth for once should be ignored. He was constantly bemoaning his crooked back, and railing against Providence for having awarded him so unfortunate a lot ; in general he loved to make the most of his deformity, particularly when he wished to work on Nelly's feelings, and yet, so contradictory is human nature, he liked now to be spoken to as if he were made like other men, and fitted for the same occupations in life. He was as pleased and flattered by Dr Monkton's familiar words and actions, as an ugly woman is to be called "pretty," although her sense may tell her that the honeyed compliment is only a delusion and a snare.

When the meal was concluded, the guest drew out his watch, and said, with many a regret, that he feared he must not stay longer, or he should not get back to Hilstone that night. Upon which Nelly expressed a hope that he would not lose the dinner which was to be prepared for him at Reddington. In truth, it had never been ordered, but Dr Monkton thought he might just as well derive the advantage of being supposed to have made a sacrifice.

"It is of little consequence if I do," he replied, with the softest smile ; "I shall deserve no pity on that account, Miss Brooke, since the exchange has been only *too* delightful to me." And thereupon the twins thought that their new acquaintance must be as generous and unselfish as he was otherwise charming.

"But I must not forget," he continued, as he rose from his seat, "that my principal object in coming here was to make a few inquiries relative to Mr Robert Brooke's state of health. I am aware," turning to the brother, "that you already have a professional attendant, who doubtless has done everything for you that is necessary ; therefore pray acquit me, in this offer, of any wish or intention of intruding on his privileges ; but two heads are said to be better than one, and if my advice or opinion, as a friend—as a *friend* remember—and in no other capacity, will be likely to be any comfort or reassurance to you, pray command me."

"You are very kind," commenced Robert.

Although his chief inducement to receive Dr Monkton had been founded on the hope of his doing something for him, now that he had been spoken to as if he were like others, he had become ashamed again of displaying his deformities.

"Oh! Bertie, dear, *do* let Dr Monkton see your spine," interposed Nelly, fearful lest her brother's hesitation should indicate a coming refusal.

"As a *friend*, mind," reiterated the doctor; "if I give my opinion on your case, it must be as one friend speaking to another. Perhaps it would even be best not to mention the fact of my having done so to the gentleman who is at present attending you."

"Oh, Bumble wouldn't mind," said Robert, carelessly, "he is an awful old fool; he said himself that"——

"Excuse me, my dear friend," said the doctor, blandly, interrupting, "but there is a certain etiquette observable in our profession, which must not be outraged. I would rather hear nothing of the capabilities or method of treatment of the person who has hitherto advised you. It would make no difference to my own opinion. Is it to be then or not? I am afraid the time is going."

At this Robert's vanity yielded to the urgency of the case.

"Well, perhaps it would be best, since I may not see you again for some time. Nelly, take care that no one comes into the room."

She crept out of it with a grateful passing glance at Dr Monkton, and took up her station as guard in the whitewashed passage. In reality she did not remain there more than ten or fifteen minutes, but in her anxiety she thought that the interview would never be over. At last, the muttered conversation was at an end, and there was a sound of hearty farewell, and of steps approaching the door. How cheerful was the doctor's voice. He would never surely speak in such lively tones if Bertie's back were quite incurable. And her brother was laughing too, actually laughing. Nelly clasped her hands and prematurely returned thanks to Heaven. In another minute the door opened, and Dr Monkton came out.

"I have not a minute to lose," he said, hurriedly. "Good-bye, Miss Brooke. Many thanks for your hospitality. You will see me here again, some of these days. Good-bye, good-bye."

But as he released her hand, she ran after him down the passage, saying—

"Oh! Dr Monkton, what do you think of Bertie's back? Pray tell me, I am so very anxious!"

"But it is a long story," he replied, smiling, "and if I stay to tell it you now, I shall never get back to Reddington in time for my train. May I not write it?"

"Oh, no! no! I *am* so anxious; let me walk by your side

as far as the gate," and throwing a plaid shawl over her head, she passed out with him upon the gravel path.

At first the doctor was puzzled what to say to her ; he would have greatly preferred writing ; but she was almost imperative in her love and suspense.

He had examined her brother's back, and seen at a glance that the case was hopeless of cure ; it was not a weak spine which Robert Brooke suffered from, but a curvature which had existed since his birth ; and he had also made another discovery concerning him during his visit, which he was still more unwilling to disclose. But Dr Monkton was a man who, in his seductive tones, could assure a patient, on whose forehead Death had already commenced to set his seal, that a few hours would, in all probability, see a change for the better in him ; and therefore he was not long at a loss how to satisfy poor Nelly's anxiety.

"Ought he to take any medicine?" was her first question.

"Beyond a simple tonic to keep up the strength," replied the doctor, "your brother's is not a case for medicine, Miss Brooke. Less good is effected in spinal complaints by inward treatment than by outward means, such as mineral baths, shampooing, and the use of such supports as shall enable the patient to take the exercise necessary to strengthen the muscles, without the fear of encountering fatigue."

"Which he will never have the means or opportunity of procuring," said Nelly, mournfully.

"We must not make too sure of that, Miss Brooke. They are not to be had in Bickton, certainly, but your brother may not always live in Bickton. Meanwhile he and I are going to commence a correspondence on the subject. He has promised to write to me a week hence, and tell me all about himself ; and as business will probably bring me this way again in the course of next month, I shall then hope to see you again, if you will permit me to do so."

"We shall be only too pleased," said Nelly ; "but, Dr Monkton, do tell me one thing before you go—if Bertie had all these baths, and instruments and things, is he likely to be cured then ? Is there any chance that he will ever be able to walk upright, or to walk at all like other people?"

They had reached the Farm gate by this time, and as she placed her hand upon it, preparatory to letting him pass through, she fixed her dark blue eyes so seriously upon his face, that Dr Monkton shuffled about and felt that he could not deceive her.

"I hope so—I should trust so," he replied, "but without a trial it is quite impossible to say. Meanwhile, Miss Brooke, the great thing is to keep his mind from becoming too anxious about himself, and not to permit him to be exposed to the evening air ; these spring months are very treacherous."

"But there is not," she inquired, in breathless alarm, "there is not anything else the matter with him, Dr Monkton, is there?"

"Oh dear, no!" replied the doctor, though uneasily, "nothing, at least, of any consequence ; his chest requires care, and he has a cough, as of course you know, which will doubtless disappear with a change of weather."

"Bertie has had that cough for some time past," faltered Nelly, "but it was so slight, it seemed to give him so little trouble that we never thought it required any attention."

"And no more it does, beyond what I have mentioned," said the doctor, reassuringly, "but I will speak further with you, Miss Brooke, on this subject when next we meet, for I shall assuredly come again to Little Bickton, and that at a distance of not many weeks ;" and with a farewell shake of the hand he left her.

When he had walked a little way on his road to the small public-house where he had desired the fly which had brought him there, to wait, Dr Monkton turned his head towards Bickton Farm to have another look at Nelly. She was in the same position as when he had left her—leaning with one hand upon the garden gate, whilst the other held the folds of the plaid shawl which she had carelessly gathered about her throat. She was leaning there, regardless of the chilly April evening, or of her guest's departure, trying to extract a further meaning from his information than he had chosen she should do.

"Yes ! I shall assuredly come again, Miss Brooke," was the doctor's mental reiteration, as he watched the graceful figure, and waved his hand in token of a last good-bye ; and then, turning the corner of the road, he disappeared from her abstracted view.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR WHOM DOES HE COME ?

WHEN Nelly Brooke returned to her brother's side, he was in higher spirits than she remembered to have ever seen him display before. She had intended to take him to task for speaking so unreservedly before a stranger, but something in the tone and

manner of Dr Monkton during their brief colloquy, had awakened a chord in her heart which made all thought of reproving Bertie die away. She found him eagerly expecting her return ; ready, with bright, excited eyes to communicate the new fallacious hopes with which his breast was filling, and as she entered the room, he exclaimed—

“Hurra ! Nelly ! there’s a chance for me, yet ! the doctor says he shall be this way again in a fortnight, when he will bring a drawing for me to look at, of some famous instrument which will support my back in standing or walking (what a fool old Bumble must be, never to have proposed such a thing for me before), and meanwhile I am to take as much exercise as I can without fatigue, and I’ll tell you what I mean to do—borrow Mr Ray’s crutches ! I know he has a pair, for he used them when he broke his leg on the ice five years ago—and when old Watts was in his last illness (you remember old John Watts’ death, Nell, don’t you ?) he had the loan of them for a long time, so I suppose Ray would lend them to me if I asked him.”

“I am sure he would,” said Nelly, “for he has offered them to you before now, Bertie, only you were so averse to using them. But had you not better lie down again, darling ? You have sat up so much this afternoon, that I am afraid you will be terribly tired, and your cheeks and hands are burning.”

“Nonsense,” he replied, impatiently, “I am not in the least tired ; besides Monkton says I am to take as much exercise as I can. The fact is, Nelly, I have been kept lying down a great deal too much as it is—these country doctors know nothing about a case like mine. If I had had a fellow like Monkton from the beginning, I should have been as strong as other men. I only require judicious treatment to set me all right again.”

“Did Dr Monkton tell you that, Bertie ?” inquired Nelly, with compassionate surprise.

“Well, no, not exactly ; but he said that I might have twice the enjoyment out of life that I do, if I was once put in the proper way of managing myself. It’s all management, Nell ! You’ll see ! I shall be able to outwalk you this day six months. But what a capital fellow this Monkton is—I could listen to him for ever ; I think he is the cleverest man I ever spoke to : and so kind with it all.”

“He does seem very kind,” replied Nelly, “for he can have no object but kindness in taking so much interest in us. But Bertie, dear, don’t you think you were a little—just a little—too

free in telling him about the quarrel between poor grandpapa and Uncle Nigel?"

"Not a bit of it," said her brother, decidedly. "You came in at the fag end of our conversation, and had not heard what I did. Dr Monkton knew the whole story before he ever came here; and we were only discussing the details."

"But are you sure of that?" inquired Nelly, dubiously.

"Would you discredit the assertion of a gentleman?" was the magnanimous reply. "You never cast a suspicion on anything Nigel Brooke told us of himself, or his intentions, and yet you doubt the word of a man like Monkton, who is worth twenty of him."

"Oh, no! not *doubt*, Bertie; that is too decided a term to use; but we are all apt, when speaking fast, and on a subject which interests us, to deceive ourselves, and I thought perhaps that you might have drawn a deeper inference from Dr Monkton's words than he intended you should do, and you would not like so unpleasant a story to be circulated, would you?"

"You thought, in fact," said Bertie, in a tone of injury, "that either I or the doctor might be a fool, and incapable of comprehending each other's statements; but I made mine pretty clear, at all events. If any one is to blame for the repetition, it is that precious aunt and cousin of yours at Orpington, whom you are always so anxious to defend, and who appear to have blabbed the matter far and wide, in the most indecent manner. But I'll be even with them yet," he continued, compelled at last to seek the rest which he had refused at her suggestion. "The day may come when I shall be in a position to cry quits with Mr Nigel Brooke, and then he shall see whether I can hold my own or not."

Whenever her brother became thus grandiloquent and bombastic in his manner of talking, Nelly knew that it was time for him to leave off conversation, for he was apt, after any excitement, to pass a feverish and restless night, so she hastened to wheel his couch round to the fire, and to throw a warm rug over his recumbent figure, and then taking up a book to read aloud to him, she soon lulled him off into his usual afternoon doze. But that was not the last absurd boast which she was destined to hear from Bertie's lips. To her astonishment, during the next few days his energy on the subject appeared rather to increase than to decrease, and he so often made allusions to the probability of finding himself in the future in a position to take his revenge on his aunt and cousin, that she began to wonder what Dr Monkton could pos-

sibly have said to raise such an idea in her brother's mind. Yet the visit had not been without its good effect; Bertie, from the date of it, really made an effort, with the assistance of Mr Ray's crutches, to take more exercise, and his appetite and temper becoming less capricious in consequence, caused poor Nelly to think she had reason to bless the day on which she had first seen the face of the Hilstone doctor. When a week had elapsed, her brother sat down to open a correspondence with his newly-made friend. He said that he had promised to do so, and that it was necessary for the progression of his cure; and Nelly was too pleased that he should have found any interest in life, to suggest that the proceeding, considering they were so soon to see the doctor again, must be rather a useless one. She did not even ask to read the epistle, which was composed and despatched with an assumption of great importance and secrecy, and Bertie, who loved at times to stand on such miserable little bits of dignity, did not offer to show it her. But she was quite content, she had only welcomed Dr Monkton for her brother's sake; and when his answer arrived, intimating that the Reddington case would again require his attendance on the following Saturday, and that if they could procure him a bed in the village he would sleep at Little Bickton, she was prepared to do all she could for the comfort of one whom she had already come to look upon as Bertie's friend. Yet she could not quite agree with the latter when he insisted that there was no bed in the village good enough for the doctor, and that either he or she must resign their own quarters for his accommodation. She would not have had Bertie inconvenienced for the sake of a prince of the blood royal, and yet it was more difficult to procure shelter for two persons than one.

"If *you* will not do it," her brother had said, "*I* must!" an unprecedented offer on his part, but one which he well knew would never be accepted; "but we cannot possibly allow this man to come down here solely to benefit *me*, and then consider it too much trouble to put ourselves to a little inconvenience in order to make him comfortable."

"But I will give him up my room directly, darling, if you will only tell me where Aggie and I are to go to. They have a spare bed at the Farm Cottage, which Alice Weston says we are welcome to use; but it is only a single one."

"Well, surely you can take that, and Aggie can sleep anywhere, on the floor or in the passage. It is only for one night."

"Nurse Aggie is a very old woman now," said Nelly,

thoughtfully ; "I think I am better able to sleep on the floor than she is."

"Oh, very well, Nelly ! if you had no intention of making yourself agreeable, why didn't you say so at once, and save all this trouble. I shall sleep at the Cottage, then, and the doctor can have my room. That's decided."

"I'm sure it isn't," exclaimed his sister, as he knew she would. "I would not have you move for the world, Bertie, and with your cough too. Aggie and I will find beds somewhere, never fear, and Dr Monkton shall sleep in our room ; and I am sure if your health is improved by his visits, no sacrifice could be too great to make for him."

"Well, that is just what I said," replied her brother, mollified by her acquiescence, "and after all, what is giving up one's bed for a single night ?" and, indeed, considering that the bed was not his own, it appeared less than nothing in Bertie's eyes.

But Nelly was not permitted to carry out her hospitable design. On the day fixed, Dr Monkton duly arrived, but he would not hear of occupying her room, and when pressed by Robert on the subject, threatened to return to Reddington if he were not allowed to do as he chose. So he lay that night at the Farm Cottage, and Nelly and old Aggie retained undisputed possession of their own apartment.

Dr Monkton made himself quite as friendly and agreeable on this occasion as he had done on the last—even more, indeed ; but Nelly perceived a difference in his manner of doing so. In the first place, he was not so eager to talk about Bertie's infirmities as he had been during his previous visit. He brought down, as he had promised, designs of the various surgical instruments used in similar cases, with their makers' names and prices attached, all of which were considerably higher than either of the twins had imagined ; and he presented Bertie with a small volume containing the rules to be followed for his general health, which he advised him to peruse and be guided by.

But here his attentions were directed towards the presentation of a splendid bouquet of hot-house flowers, which he had bought for Nelly ; and of a parcel of books which he pretended were to be read aloud for her brother's amusement, but which had evidently been selected more with a view to her own taste. He was so anxious to learn what Miss Brooke thought of the flowers, and whether she had yet read the books, that he answered poor Bertie's long accounts of his latest symptoms and observations

rather more curtly than was flattering, and which for a while the patient was disposed to resent. Nelly also perceived this apparent relaxation of interest for her brother's case on the part of the doctor, but she attributed it, with an inward sigh, to the fact that he considered it hopeless; and when she found that she could not bring the conversation round to the old subject, tried all she could to divert Bertie's observation from the fact that it was no longer the engrossing topic. But although Dr Monkton talked over the tea-table of other things than spinal complaints, he was still so pleasant and entertaining, that as before his host and hostess could not but be charmed with him. The next day Robert Brooke much wished his guest to remain with him during the hours of morning service, so that they might have a good opportunity for private converse, and threw out several hints to that effect; but the doctor was smitten with a particular desire to inspect the whitewashed interior of the unpretending building which went by the name of Little Bickton church, and begged to be permitted to accompany Nelly there. After which there was some other native curiosity, lying quite in the opposite direction to the Farm, which he was anxious to see, and by that means induced his unsuspecting guide to lead him home by a much longer route. Still Robert had the doctor for some time to himself before he remounted his horse (he had ridden from Reddington this time) and rode away from Little Bickton. As he did so, Nelly felt that she was not so anxious to see him again as she had been before. Much of her enthusiasm about Dr Monkton had already evaporated, or rather he had frightened it away, by having allowed her more than once to detect him in the act of regarding her in the same steadfast and glowing manner which had caused her so much uneasiness on the first occasion of their having met. Each time she had encountered the fixed and piercing gaze of his dark eyes, her thoughts had flown back to the coursing match on Hilstone Downs, and to all that her Cousin Nigel had then said concerning the man before her, and she instinctively felt that, notwithstanding all his kindness to Bertie, the day would come when she should dislike him. Yet, when he was once more lost to view, she tried to reason herself out of what appeared to be a childish prejudice. It might only be the doctor's manner, she argued; and after all, he came in the capacity of her brother's friend, and not hers. And had he been Mephistopheles himself, she would scarcely have dared, under such circumstances, to resent any conduct he might choose to

assert towards her. But she was rather inclined to find fault with his having taken so little notice during this second visit of Bertie's ills—particularly as Bertie himself more than once alluded to the same subject. Yet when, not a week afterwards, a friendly tap with the knuckles on their parlour door was followed, to their intense surprise, by the re-appearance of the doctor, they mutually agreed they had wronged him by deciding so hastily that his interest in the invalid had been too sudden and great to last. This time they had not received the least notice of his coming, and Somerset appeared, in their unsophisticated minds, to be such a long way off that they could not believe, until Dr Monkton assured them it was the case, he had made the journey for the sole purpose of visiting themselves. Yet he spoke the truth in saying so, for although it took several hours to traverse the distance between Hilstone and Reddington, a return ticket did not cost above a couple of pounds; and what was that to a man like Dr Monkton, who was flying about the country half his time, and taking fees every hour in the day? He did not stay very long on this last occasion, as his time was valuable, but he made the most of his short visit. He came to inform Miss Brooke that he had taken the liberty of bringing a small hamper for her acceptance as far as the Reddington Station, which should be forwarded by the carrier next day, containing a few spring trifles in the way of fruit and vegetables from his own garden, so that she and her brother might be able to judge how far assiduity was effectual in turning a little plot of cathedral ground to use.

And, indeed, if the forced strawberries, the green peas, and the sea-kale—to say nothing of the roses and mignonette which the unpacking of that hamper on the following day disclosed—had really all been grown in the month of May on the doctor's plot of cathedral ground, his skill in gardening could not have been too highly commended.

But he had also a proposal to make, and this was for the brother's benefit. He had found almost by chance (so Dr Monkton averred) that he had an invalid-chair lying somewhere in his stables, not new certainly, but still perfectly fit for use, and it was positively none to himself. Would Mr Robert Brooke allow him to forward it to Bickton for his convenience? It was light and easy, and might be of service in conveying him about the lanes in summer time, and he would be giving the doctor real pleasure by his acceptance of it.

At this offer, Nelly expected to see some remembrance of a

similar one, which had been abruptly refused, flash across her brother's face, but no such token appeared that Nigel Brooke's kindness was not utterly forgotten. Robert appeared delighted with the doctor's present; was profuse in his expressions of gratitude; only fearful apparently of encroaching on his friend's generosity by a too ready acquiescence. But his sister did not say a word; she felt that she could not; she was too pained at the marked difference with which Bertie had received the announcement of this gift, and of the other.

The chair and the hamper arrived in due course, and for a month from that period the twins were never free from the visits of Dr Monkton. He was constantly making his appearance at all sorts of unexpected times, although he generally came on a Sunday, and never empty-handed. Now he brought some simple apparatus for strengthening and expanding Bertie's cramped muscles, or a medical work by which he might study his own symptoms, and reckon up his chances of relief, for the youth was very fond of perusing any books which bore upon his case; then the last new song or novel for Nelly, or bonbons, of which she was childishly fond; or a new collar for Thug, or anything which may be presented and accepted between those who are only friends.

Of course these constant and marked attentions on the part of the Hilstone doctor, could not take place without exciting much comment amongst the acquaintance of the twins.

Mr Ray, as soon as he heard of his visits to the Farm, made a point in his capacity of guardian of becoming acquainted with the stranger, and whilst he publicly expressed his approval of his clever conversation and courteous demeanour, privately, or before his wife and daughters, would rub his hands and chuckle over the prospect of so excellent a marriage for his favourite little Nelly.

For there was but one person in Bickton who had any doubt with respect to the object of Dr Monkton, in so often making his appearance there.

Mrs Weston, who had passed her opinion on him from the first, as being the possessor of the most elegant figure and the finest eyes she had ever seen, declared she had never met any one so worthy to be Nelly's husband; whilst even old Aggie, who did not feel very friendly towards the doctor, was forced to confess that he looked "quite the gentleman," and that he and her bird "would make a fine couple, bless 'em."

Even Robert Brooke, selfishly as he was wrapt up in his own concerns, could not fail to notice what was become patent to all; and, delighted at the prospect thus opened before himself and his sister, daily sounded the praises of their benefactor more, whilst simple-hearted Nelly listened and smiled, and agreed to what her brother said, and of all the world was the only one to remain blind to the fact which concerned herself the most.

CHAPTER XXV.

NELLY'S EYES ARE OPENED.

"MISS NELLY," said Nurse Aggie, slyly, one day, as she and her young mistress were together in the little back kitchen which Mrs Weston gave up for the use of her lodgers, "can you tell me for why that gentleman from Hilstone comes here so often? The Bickton folk is always inquiring that question of me, and I should like to be able to satisfy them, and you should know the reason, my dear, if any one do."

At this address Nelly stopped short in her manufacture of pie-crust, and looked up in the old woman's face.

"For what reason does Dr Monkton come to Bickton, Aggie?" she said, slightly amending her nurse's grammar; "why, to see Bertie, to be sure."

Aggie threw the peel of the potato which she had just pared right away to the other side of the kitchen.

"Lor', Miss Nelly! to hear you talk, if one wouldn't think you was a mere infant. What! you mean me to believe that he comes all the way from Hilstone every week or ten days only for the pleasure of speaking with Master Robert? Tut!"

At this display of impatience, Nelly laughed.

"Not only to speak to him, you silly old thing, but to see after his spine, of course, and his general health. Dr Monkton is kind enough to attend Bertie professionally, you know, nurse, though I fear no one will ever be able to do him much good."

"And pray how many times have the doctor examined Master Robert's spine, Miss Nelly, if I may make so bold as to ask?" inquired the old woman.

"Well, I don't think he has really looked at it more than once," replied Nelly, returning to her pie-crust, "but he always inquires after it, and tells Bertie what is best to do to strengthen himself; and I suppose that is all that is necessary."

"Necessary ! yes, I should think so, and a deal more into the bargain," was the servant's reply. "Dr Monkton won't never do your brother any good, my dearie, and for the plain reason that he can't. If he's the clever gentleman they say, he must have known the first time he see Master Robert's back that it'll never be cured in this world. I took him from the birth Miss Nelly, as I did yourself ; and, as soon as ever I see his poor body, I called to the doctor, and I says, 'This one will be a cripple,' says I ; and the doctor he says, 'So it will, sure enough,' and no one but yourself had ever a doubt on the subject from that hour to this. And if Dr Monkton flatters Master Robert with the hope that it will be otherwise, he is doing of him a cruel kindness, and I should like to tell him so."

"But I don't know that he does, Aggie," said Nelly, carelessly ; "indeed, from what he has told me, I should think it very unlikely. He may not wish to tell dear Bertie for a certainty that he will never be strong, but I am sure he thinks so."

"Then for why do he come here a-wasting his precious time, Miss Nelly ?"

"I really can't tell you, Aggie ! I suppose he is interested in the case in a medical point of view. He may wish to try and do all he can for Bertie, however little chance there is of a cure."

"Medical fiddlesticks, my dearie !" exclaimed the old nurse, with bitter sarcasm ; "don't you go for to stuff such rubbish down my throat. Doctors may be very partial to their medical points of view, Miss Nelly, and it's quite right they should, considering it's their business, but when they're young and handsome, there's another point of view as they likes much better."

"And what's that ?" said Nelly, smiling.

"Why, making love, my dear ! It's a much pleasanter point of view than looking at crooked backs, and you may be quite sure as Dr Monkton is of my opinion."

"Well, he makes love to no one here," was the decided reply, "so that cannot be his object in coming."

"May be not, but he wants to," said the old nurse.

"Who says so ?" inquired Nelly, quickly.

"Why, all Bickton, my dear. There's not one of us, from the vicar and Mrs Weston down to the servants about the farm, but can't see as it's yourself the doctor comes after, and not Master Robert, by no manner of means."

Nelly grew scarlet.

"The vicar says so," she exclaimed, "and Mrs Weston ?"

"To be sure, my dear, and a score of others beside ; and how you 've kept your own eyes shut so long, beats me altogether."

"Because it is not true," said Nelly, indignantly ; "and if any one dares to say it again, Aggie, you must tell them so. Dr Monkton has never made love to me, and never will, for a very good reason, because I should not allow it. He is Master Robert's friend, and if he shows me any kindness, it is for Master Robert's sake, and not mine. And I shall be very angry if you ever mention this subject again, or allow other people to do so." And Nelly held her head an inch higher for the remainder of the time she spent in the back kitchen.

But her eyes once opened, she found it difficult to close them again. She could not forget the conversation she had held with old Aggie, nor prevent herself from recalling it, at moments when she would least wish to do so. At first she quite believed that it was only the usual gossip of a little country village, but as the days went on, she made herself wretched by fancying it might be true. She could no longer disguise the fact from herself that Dr Monkton's attentions were becoming more marked, that he held her hand longer, and pressed it more warmly than he used to do, that there was a deeper meaning in his lengthened gaze, and a softer modulation in his voice when he addressed her than there had been at first. And the knowledge made her painfully shy of encountering him, and conscious when in his presence. She tried to avoid him as much as she could, and would steal away whenever she had intimation of his approach ; but as she was so constant an attendant on her brother, this was not easy of accomplishment. She grew very bashful of mixing in the general conversation ; would blush vividly when personally addressed, and evinced an evident hesitation in accepting any more offerings at the doctor's hands. The signs of conscious guilt or innocence in a prisoner placed at the bar are said to be so similar, that it is difficult for an unpractised judge to distinguish between them ; the same may be affirmed of the symptoms in a young girl, of unacknowledged love or dislike.

Nelly's heart shrank from the mere idea of receiving Dr Monkton as a lover ; yet had she just discovered that he was all in all to her, she could not have oftener blushed beneath his glance, or been more confused and self-conscious when in his presence than she was.

And he, being like most of us, but too ready to believe what he desired, misinterpreted these tokens, and pursued his suit with

redoubled ardour. At this juncture, it will be as well to halt for a moment and analyse what were his own feelings and intentions in the matter. They are quickly told : Dr Monkton was simply passionately in love with Nelly Brooke.

There is no other word by which his feelings for her could be properly expressed, for it alone comprises all that they were worth.

He was a clever and politic man ; he possessed refinement and good taste, and his ordinary manner was so suave and gentle, that he was generally accredited with good nature ; but he was narrow-minded, cowardly, and sensual, and the women who had baffled his pursuit of them, had had reason to rue the hour they did it.

He had been very much attracted by Nelly's face and figure from the first time he had seen them. What so particularly took his fancy in them he would have been puzzled himself to say. He had known numbers more lovely, many as fresh and pure. Yet the memory of Nelly Brooke remained with him, whilst that of others faded away. Perhaps the secret lay in the fact that her appearance was eminently calculated to arrest the attention of any one who knew the value of perfect health, and could recognise the symptoms of it.

Bloodless hands, and pearly skins, and wasp-like figures, had no power to excite the admiration of James Monkton ; he felt no interest in hectic flushes, and feverishly brilliant eyes, or in any of the hysterical tremors, which attack young women with unhealthy organisations, except for the sake of affording them relief.

He had not studied disease under each of its hideous forms for nothing. However whited the outward sepulchre might be, he could detect at a glance what it contained.

But the free circulation and the elastic steps of the country-bred girl ; the firm white teeth and the wholesome skin ; the clear, dewy eye, and the equal temperament, had charms for him which he felt to be quite irresistible. He had the same feeling regarding the possession of Nelly Brooke which makes one stoop to kiss an innocent child, or bury one's face in a bouquet of fresh roses ; there was such an atmosphere of milk, and dew, and cowslips pervading her, that he felt as if he should always have the country about him whilst she was by his side.

These were the only reasons for which he loved her ; he knew no higher, for her heart and mind were a sealed book to him, and he was not the man to whom she would ever disclose them. He saw that she was simple and unaffected, he heard that she was

devoted and self-denying, but whether she were intellectual or foolish, religious or profane, Dr Monkton neither knew nor cared to inquire. If his opinion of her mental capacity had been seriously asked, he would probably have said that it was rather below than above the average, but this was no defect in his eyes, for he considered an intellectual woman as rather an anomaly in nature. In his idea, they were creatures, under certain conditions, to be caressed and looked after, but under none to be let out of leading-strings. Had he been told that, hidden under the domestic bearing and the bashful rusticity of Nelly Brooke, lay the capability of experiencing emotions as ardent as ever woman felt, he would not have credited the information, still less that her brain was as strong as her heart, and that both slumbered simply because they had never met with the occasion which should rouse them. He was rich and he was independent, free to choose a wife according to his own taste, and bound to consult no one in the matter, and his choice had fallen upon Nelly Brooke. It was on account of his anxiety to trace her whereabouts that he had quarrelled with Mrs Brooke of Orpington, and when he came down to Bickton Farm, and found, as he thought, that the prey would be easy of conquest, he determined to follow up the chase. He was perfectly aware, from what he had seen and Robert had told him, that he should not gain the sister without consenting to saddle himself with the brother also, but the thought troubled him little. Had he been thoroughly conscientious, he was too much in love to think any condition hard which should gain him Nelly for a wife ; but Dr Monkton was not unused to play fast and loose with his conscience, and he knew that, should he ever come to feel the burden irksome, there were more ways than one of ridding himself of it. And things were at this pass when the first of June arrived.

"Nelly," said her brother, abruptly, as she sat stitching by his side on the afternoon of that day, "we must leave little Bickton."

For a moment, his sister thought that she had mistaken his intention, for this was the first time he had ever mentioned the idea to her.

"Leave Bickton, Bertie ; what do you mean ? who have we to go to ?" she asked quietly.

"It's not necessary to have some one to go to, in order to leave a place, I suppose," he answered.

The work fell from Nelly's fingers.

"But you don't mean that you wish us to go and *live* away from Bickton, do you?"

"Of course I do, what else should I mean?"

"But how can we? where shall we find lodgings at the rent we pay for these, or be able to live on the same sum? Think how poor we are, Bertie."

"Provisions are the same price everywhere," he answered, "and so is house-rent if one knows how to manage. I can't see that everything is so wondrously cheap here, as you try to make out, Nelly."

"But will Mr Ray let us go?" she next inquired; "we must do as he says until we are of age, you know."

"Of course if you are determined to throw obstacles on the plan in every possible way," said Robert, testily, "it will never come to pass. If you go telling Ray a lot of nonsense about the expense and the impossibility of making the money do, he will put his veto on it directly. But if you persuade him a little the other way, he would consent to anything."

"But supposing," said Nelly, timidly, "supposing, Bertie, that the money was sufficient, and that Mr Ray approved of the proposal, where should we go to?"

At this question Robert slightly reddened.

"Oh, I don't know, it will be time enough to think about that when the other business is settled. To London, perhaps, or to some nice quiet town: anywhere but in the country. Why wouldn't Hilstone do? You said it was a jolly old place, didn't you?"

He had some idea that the mere mention of moving would bring Dr Monkton's intentions to a crisis, and if not, that the daily sight of his sister, attired in all the glories of Hilstone millinery, would be certain to effect the same end. He began to be tired of the wooing, and to long for all the benefits which should accrue to him from Nelly's marriage. But at the mention of Hilstone, she blushed deeper than himself.

"Oh, no, Bertie, not there, anywhere but there."

"And why not?" he asked.

"It is so near Orpington," she murmured, unable to find a better reason.

"And do you think I should permit that to make any difference in my plans?" replied Robert, loftily. "The Orpington people can keep out of my way, I suppose, and if they did not, I should very soon teach them to act differently. It would be

everything to me to be nearer Dr Monkton ; he says himself, that he could do twice as much for me if he had me under his eye, but I suppose my health is not of the slightest moment. I may drag on as now to the end of my miserable existence so long as you are not asked to leave your beloved Bickton."

"Oh ! Bertie ! how very unkind of you to say so," cried Nelly, biting her lips with vexation ; "you know that I would go to the world's end with you if it would do you any good : but notwithstanding Dr Monkton's kindness, I don't see that you are any the better for his visits here."

"And what should you know about it?" said her brother, in no way softened by her faltering voice ; "you cannot tell how much my strength may be improving all this time, or what end Monkton has in view by pursuing a quiet treatment with me at first. Leave such things to men and doctors, my dear, and keep to your stockings and puddings. If you don't, and, on the contrary, attempt to set your judgment against mine in an emergency like this, you may be the entire ruin of my future."

"I shall never be that, darling," she exclaimed as she fondly clasped his hand ; "you know that whatever is best for you will always seem best to me. But let us go to London, Bertie (if we go at all). There are hospitals there, where you can have the best advice without paying for it, and after all that would be much better than laying ourselves under such a heavy obligation to one like Dr Monkton, who is no relation to us."

"Never mind the obligation, little sister," said Robert, coaxed into returning her caresses, "we will find some way of paying him by and by."

"I don't see how," she answered, thoughtfully.

"But you will promise not to set yourself against this scheme of leaving Bickton, Nelly, won't you?"

"If you will promise to speak to Mr Ray about it openly, Bertie, and not to conceal anything from him ; I am quite ready to abide by his decision."

"I shall not mention the subject to Ray until I have settled it for myself. Why, the man has only the charge of our money, and as long as we don't touch the principal, what business is it of his where we spend the interest ? I shall not consult him at all, I shall only consult Monkton."

"Oh ! not Dr Monkton, Bertie ! what *can* he know about our means ? He is so rich himself, I daresay he scarcely thinks of the value of money. Pray don't speak to him until it is all

decided. Let us go to London, darling! I am sure you will like no other place so well, we shall be so happy together in London, and you have always been anxious to visit it. Pray let us go to London."

So she implored, dreading the alternative of a residence in Hilstone; but although Bertie managed to soothe her with some excuse, he was determined to have his own way.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DOCTOR PUTS A QUESTION, AND RECEIVES HIS ANSWER.

TOWARDS the close of the next afternoon, as Nelly was about to emerge from her bedroom, where she had been preparing for a stroll, she heard the now familiar voice of the Hilstone doctor conversing with her brother. She had left Thug in the sitting-room, anxiously awaiting her promise to return; she had even grasped the handle of the door which divided the apartments when the sound made her pause and shrink backwards. He had been at Bickton only three days previously, and she had hoped that for a while he would leave her in peace; for being forced to acknowledge that his visits were to herself, she had begun to dread them, and on this particular evening she felt as if she could not meet him. So, regardless of Thug's disappointment, she gently relaxed her hold upon the door-handle, and slipping back again into her own room, opened the window, and with the aid of a chair, escaped thence into the garden. It was a lovely summer evening: the lilacs and laburnums had already faded, but the air was filled with the scent of syringa and early roses; and the borders of Mrs Weston's strip of flower-garden were filled with pinks, and sweet-williams, and candy-tuft, and all those old-fashioned flowers which are so common and yet so sweet. Nelly could not leave the Farm gates without passing in front of the parlour window, so she contented herself with creeping along the narrow thrift-edged gravel path, until she reached a planked summer-house, situated at its extreme end, and which was decorated with ivy, and honeysuckle, and monthly roses outside, and with spiders' cobwebs and earwigs in. This charming little retreat was furnished with an immovable bench, surrounding its semicircular wall, which was the hardest to sit upon, being fashioned like a wooden gridiron, and the most impossible to lounge against of any seat yet planned by mortal. In front of

which was a table to match : too small to be of any use excepting as a resting-place for a book or cup of tea, and yet quite large enough to cramp the legs of those who sat upon the bench. In general, Nelly had a great horror of this summer-house, which was Mrs Weston's pride, and dreaded nothing so much as being invited to take her tea out there ; but on the present occasion she flew to it as to a harbour of refuge. Its walls were impervious to the light ; and she had caught up a book as she passed through her bedroom. Here would she lie hid at all events until the period for their evening meal, and if the doctor stayed over that, he could not remain much longer.

So tucking up her dress with a view to cheating the earwigs, Nelly settled herself on the wooden gridiron, and was soon deep in the study of Herbert's Poems. She had a great taste for poetry, as she had for music, and before long she had become so absorbed in the quiet beauty of the pages before her, that she forgot all about the doctor's visit, was even unmindful that the book she held was one of those which ostensibly he had selected for Bertie's use ; when she was once more recalled to the things of the outer world, by the abrupt and boisterous entrance of Thug, who, overjoyed at finding his mistress again, and quite regardless of the moral of the jackass and the lapdog, leapt up on the bench beside her, and thrust his black muzzle into her face.

"Oh ! my dear Thug !" exclaimed Nelly, as Herbert's Poems was knocked out of her hands and fell upon the ground, "now, just see what you've done to that nice book ! How often have I told you that you've grown a great deal too big to sit in my lap ? Well ! what's the news, old doggie ? Has the doctor gone ?" As she said this, laying her hand caressingly on the mastiff's broad forehead, she heard a step which had followed the dog.

"No ! the doctor has not gone yet," said a softly-modulated voice in answer to her outspoken question, "but he hopes that Thug's mistress will not be very sorry to hear it," and at the same moment the man from whom she had run away stood before her. At his appearance, Nelly, remembering her tucked-up dress, quickly abandoned her position, and the slight confusion attendant on her exertion and surprise, combined with the presence of Herbert's Poems, a fact which Dr Monkton was not slow to notice, emboldened him to advance into the arbour.

"Pray do not let me disturb you," he said, "I should like nothing better than to enjoy a few moments' rest in this charming

little spot. I had your brother's permission to seek you, Miss Brooke, but I hardly think I should have succeeded in my search, had it not been for Thug's sagacity."

"Oh! you wretched old Thug!" was Nelly's impatient thought, as, not knowing what else to do, she reseated herself on the arbour bench. "How I wish I had shut you up in the kitchen, instead of leaving you in the parlour." But all she said in answer to Dr Monkton's address, was —

"But perhaps Bertie may want me."

"He does not, indeed," replied the doctor, with a lingering glance from his dark eyes, as he placed his hand gently upon hers, as though to detain her. "I have but this moment left him, and he was quite aware that I might not immediately return. Your brother and I have had the most interesting conversation together, Miss Brooke."

"Have you?" she said, carelessly.

"Yes! deeply interesting to myself, at all events. We have been speaking of the advisability of your moving from Bickton, and taking up a residence in some place a little less remote."

Nelly had almost forgotten the conversation she had held with Bertie the day before; but as these words recalled it to her mind, she looked visibly distressed.

"Oh, I am so sorry"—she commenced.

"Sorry! for what? not that your brother values my advice, I trust?" inquired the doctor.

"Oh! no—not that—but I thought—at least I had hoped!—that is to say—Bertie and I spoke on this subject yesterday evening, and I wanted him so much to consult Mr Ray first. Mr Ray is our guardian, you know, Dr Monkton," she added, fearing that her words might give offence, "and we could not take any decided step without his leave, and I am afraid that Bertie does not think, that he does not know, what much greater expenses we should incur by moving from Little Bickton."

"And you think of all that for him," said Dr Monkton, admiringly.

"I am obliged to," she said, quietly; "some one must do it, and perhaps you do not know how poor we are."

"Indeed I do," he replied. "Without wishing to be inquisitive, I could hardly have visited you for so long without at least guessing it. And I am quite of your opinion, Miss Brooke. In few places in England could you live so cheaply and so well as you do here, and in no town."

"Then I am right, am I not?" she said, looking up brightly at him, "and you will advise Bertie as I do, to try and be contented with his old home and his old friends?"

But the expression of Dr Monkton's face was not encouraging.

"I hardly know what to say," he replied, musingly, "for your brother decidedly requires change; not so much change of air, as of scene and place. He wants more society and amusement; his state of mind is not healthy, and may become morbid if left to itself, and the health of his body in a great measure depends upon the state of his mind."

The look of alarm which Nelly's features assumed during this speech was just what the doctor wished to see upon them.

"Is this your real opinion of Bertie, Dr Monkton?" she asked.

"This is my real opinion; I have thought so ever since I saw him."

"Then of course that decides the matter," she said, sorrowfully; "if it is necessary for Bertie's health, it must *be* at any cost, and I am sure that Mr Ray will not oppose the plan, and we must manage the best way we can." And as if it were already settled that they should leave it, she gave a long sigh to the memory of Little Bickton.

"Yet there is little doubt," said Dr Monkton, taking up the thread of his first argument, "that London is a very expensive place, although it said to be cheaper to live there than in a country town. But it is not only that the immense demand for houses and provisions causes the tradesmen to raise their prices and landlords their rents, but that towns abound with so many temptations to spend money on amusements and luxuries, which in the country we never dream of enjoying. An income which, in a place like this, would keep a family in comfort, would barely serve in London to supply it with the necessaries of life."

"But what are we to do, then?" exclaimed Nelly, clasping her hands in despair at the picture conjured up by this assertion.

"Your brother and I have quite decided what is best to be done, Helena!" replied Dr Monkton, looking at her significantly, "and we only wait for your consent to carry our plan into execution."

She noticed neither the significance of his glance, nor the fact that he had called her by her Christian name; she only waited breathlessly to hear by what means he proposed to extricate them from their difficulty.

"Robert and I have been discussing this subject far more in

detail than I have done with yourself," continued the doctor. "I have given him my exact opinion respecting his health, and the difficulties which I foresee will beset you in moving from Bickton, and I have pointed out a way by which both ends may be happily accomplished ; by which your brother may leave this place, and have every comfort necessary to his condition, and yet be fearless of incurring either poverty or debt ;" and as Dr Monkton said this, he moved nearer to Nelly's side.

"But how?" she demanded,—*"in what way?"*

"In this way, Helena, that you should become my wife, and make your brother's interests mine."

He did not venture to touch her, and for a short time after hearing his words, she sat as quiet as though she were under a spell. She had expected this ; for days past she had watched and dreaded its coming, but, occupied with her own and Bertie's troubles, she had not been thinking of it at that moment.

How often had she, girl-like, pondered on her first offer of marriage, and tried to fancy what the visionary lover would say to her, and how she would reply to him. She had imagined that she would be sure to see the proposal hovering for hours on his lips before he dared to give his feelings vent, and that she would be blushing and trembling for the same period, under the consciousness of what was before her. And yet, here had the offer come ; not quite unexpectedly, indeed, but when she was thinking of far different things, and at the hands of one from whom she shrunk to hear such words ; a reality, but wondrously dissimilar to her girlish dream.

But she found no difficulty in answering him ; she felt that to such a proposal for her there could but be one answer. Slowly and softly the words dropped from her lips, as though it gave her pain to utter them, yet there was no trace of indecision in the tone in which Nelly Brooke replied—

"I cannot."

But Dr Monkton had no notion of taking this refusal as final ; he considered it but natural that when the thought of marriage was first presented to a young and unsophisticated girl, her feeling as well as her answer should be that she could not consent to it, and he did not doubt but that it only required a little persuasion on his own part to reconcile Nelly to the idea.

"Think again!" he murmured rather than said ; "I offer you, not only an establishment and fortune, the possession of which would satisfy any woman with moderate desires, but a home for

your brother, where he will be surrounded by the luxury which in his sad state becomes necessary, almost, to his existence ; where he will live under my own eye ; watched over and cared for as he can be nowhere else ; and within reach of the cheerful society and amusement without which I consider there is no hope that his condition will be improved."

Still all that she answered was—

"I *cannot*, Dr Monkton ; pray don't ask me again ; it is impossible."

"I offer you more than this," he said, warming with the subject.

"I offer you an affection which has been yours from the first hour we met ; which is as deep and ardent as ever woman inspired, and which is only waiting—longing—to clasp you in my arms."

"Ah !"—— and as the exclamation burst from her, Nelly bounded from her seat, and stood blushing and panting with the arbour table between herself and Dr Monkton ; for in making the last declaration, he had dared not only to press towards her side, but to lay his unhallowed touch upon her waist. She would have sat quietly for hours to refute his arguments or parry his persuasions, but the thought that he had presumed upon their position for a moment drove all the angelic out of Nelly's nature.

"How *dare* you ?" was her first note of defiance, and then a remembrance of the obligations under which she and Bertie lay to the man whom she addressed, overcame her womanly indignation, and her next words were almost apologetic in their tone. "Pray don't touch me, Dr Monkton ; I will listen to you patiently as long as you please, but you must not touch me again ; I cannot bear it ;" and she extended her hand as though to ward him off.

James Monkton's face grew very dark. He might choose to mistake her confusion and timidity, and evident avoidance of himself, as so many signs of incipient love ; but it was not quite so easy to mistake a woman's feelings towards a man whose mere touch made her shudder.

As the poor child whom he had offended watched his lowering brow, and found that he made no answer to her appeal, she began to fear that she had sinned beyond forgiveness.

"I am very sorry, Dr Monkton," she recommenced in a faltering voice ; "I am afraid that you must think me very rude, and very ungrateful, but I really don't know what else to say to you. I am quite aware how much Bertie and I owe to your friendship, and that you have been kinder to us, and given us more presents than"——

"Pray don't mention it," he said, coldly.

"But you must let me do so, please," she implored. "Don't think me worse than I am: I have felt all this very deeply, and the remembrance of it adds so much to the pain of being obliged to say what I do now. But what else *could* I say, Dr Monkton?"

"That I must leave entirely to yourself," he replied; "the question now is, what will your brother think of your decision?"

"Bertie would never wish me to be unhappy; he loves me," said Nelly, proudly.

"Which is evidently more than you do him," was the rejoinder.

"Oh! no, indeed, it is not," replied the girl, clasping her hands. "I love him dearly—God knows that I do—we have had but one heart between us ever since we were born, and his happiness is like my own. I would cut off my right hand to-morrow, to do him any good."

"Yet you will not secure the happiness of his future by giving him the home and comforts which he requires. Well, remember that I have offered them to you, and you have refused. I trust you may never have cause to regret your decision."

But Nelly did not appear to notice the sarcasm.

"Dr Monkton," she said, thoughtfully, "is it necessary to tell Bertie this? It may distress him, and it grieves me so to see him unhappy. You have been very good to us both, but I should consider it the greatest kindness you ever did me, if you would keep this a secret between ourselves, and let everything go on as it did before. Don't let my brother suffer because I seem to be ungrateful or stupid."

As Nelly said this, and turned her moistened eyes like dewy violets imploringly upon the doctor, she looked sufficiently interesting to have caused a harder-hearted man to abandon his purpose. But James Monkton had been wounded on his sorest point; the little country-bred girl whom he had expected to prove so facile of conquest, had deliberately and unreservedly rejected his honourable proposals. Had she agreed to them, his passion probably would for a time have known no bounds: but as she had dared to make him feel, she should feel herself in return.

So he rose from his seat with a short and affectedly careless laugh:—"I am afraid that's quite impossible, Miss Brooke, for as I believe I mentioned before, I came straight from your brother's side to seek you, and he not only knew with what intention I did so, but is anxiously waiting to learn the upshot of our interview. So that I need not keep him in suspense any longer.

Adieu," he continued in a light airy tone, as he left the summer-house without offering to shake her hand. "I fancy it will be a long time before you and I meet again (if we ever do so); but under the circumstances, I presume that you will not find it difficult to reconcile yourself to my absence. Adieu, once more," and waving his hand, Dr Monkton passed down the narrow gravel path, switching off the heads of the flowers as he went, and left Nelly Brooke standing in Mrs Weston's summer-house alone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHICH DOES NOT APPEAR TO GIVE GENERAL SATISFACTION.

WHEN the suit of the wicked and powerful lord in a burlesque has been scornfully rejected by the virtuous peasant maiden, and he wrathfully informs her that she shall yet "tee-remble" at the sound of his name, the audience shout at the absurdity of the situation, and ascribe half its fun to its utter improbability, and yet there are gentlemen in this nineteenth century capable in a quiet way of bidding the women who have dared to repulse them "tee-remble." Dr Monkton did it to Nelly Brooke when he left her in the arbour with that nonchalant "Adieu," saying that he fancied it would be long, if ever, before they met again.

It was his way of informing her that whether she suffered or not from her refusal of his offer, she would at least deprive her brother of the many advantages to be derived from his friendship, and he was well aware that it was the best method by which to excite her fears lest she should regret what she had done. And so far he was successful. For a few seconds she stood still, quietly regarding the seat which he had vacated, and then, as the various ways in which Bertie would feel the change before him, came stealing, one by one, upon her memory, she sunk down upon the wooden bench again, and hid her face upon the arms which lay stretched across the little table. She was not crying; she was too hurt and proud to cry; but her heart beat faster and faster as a mighty fear lest she should have made a mistake surged in her breast, and she scarcely knew if she were glad or sorry for what she had done. Not for herself; she never had but one opinion on that subject but for Bertie.

She thought of what her life with him had been before the advent of Dr Monkton: how cheerless the dark days during which

he did nothing but complain, and how lonely the long evenings, when he would either retire in weary disgust to his bed, or lie on the sofa for hours without speaking a word to her.

With pain, she recalled his bitter sarcasms on the dulness and monotony of their existence; how he had pined for more intellectual companionship than hers, and a wider field for action than Bickton afforded: worse than all, how the doctor himself had affirmed that society and amusement were absolutely necessary for his health.

She wondered if all the misery of that time would come over again,—whether Bertie, under the knowledge that he must give up the company of his friend, would relapse into the old morbid tempers, which, although not cured, had been far less frequently indulged in, since he had enjoyed the occasional society of Dr Monkton. She shuddered as she acknowledged the probability of all this, and yet she could not persuade herself that she had acted otherwise than she should have done.

“I am very, very sorry that it has so happened,” was her inward conclusion, “and I would give worlds, if I possessed them, to undo it; but since that is impossible, what else could I have said to him?”

How long she had remained by herself she hardly knew, but at this moment a cold nose was thrust against the only part of her cheek which her position left visible, and she raised her head to encounter the soft brown eyes of the mastiff, who was patiently sitting on the bench beside her, until she should be pleased to notice him again. But to him she seemed so lonely, inwardly as well as outwardly, that the animal's honest affection appealed to her as the sympathy of a friend.

“What else could I have said to him, Thug?” she exclaimed, clasping her hands round his thick throat, and looking him in the face as though he understood all she said: “how could I become his wife when I don't love him half so well as I do you? But *you'll* never forsake me, dear doggie, will you? you'll love me, and be my friend, whatever happens; oh! dear, oh! dear, I hope that Bertie won't be very angry with me.”

She loosed her hold of the mastiff, and looked up wearily into the evening sky. The sun had quite gone down by this time, and the early summer twilight was just a little chilly, and Nelly's limbs felt cramped with having maintained the same position for so long.

“I wonder if he has gone,” she thought, and her first idea was,

that if Dr Monkton stayed till midnight she could not meet him again, but the next moment her native courage came to her aid.

"After all, I have done no wrong," she silently argued, "and Bertie must be waiting for his tea."

So she quitted the arbour, leaving Herbert's Poems lying forgotten on its sandy floor; and with Thug (who, feeling something was wrong, had assumed the appearance of a criminal) following close at her heels, walked slowly back towards the house. As she drew near the old parlour window, now wreathed with summer roses, she paused for an instant to see if she could catch the sound of conversation. But all was silent, and she crept past it and entered by their own door.

The room was nearly dark; no candles had been lighted, and Nelly could only just distinguish the form of her brother in his usual position on the sofa.

"Bertie, darling," she said, as she saw the unspread table, "are you not ready for tea?"

There was no answer.

"Shall I ring the bell, Bertie? I didn't think it was so late."

Still her question received no reply.

"Bertie, darling, won't you speak to me?" imploringly.

The figure on the sofa neither moved nor spoke. Nelly groped her way to the fireplace with a sigh, and pulling the bell, in another minute old Aggie was in the room.

"Why, Miss Nelly, my dear, are you all in the dark? I thought you had fetched candles to yourself ever so long ago. Is the doctor gone?"

"I suppose so; I have been in the garden. Is Dr Monkton gone, Bertie?"

"Of course he is." This answer was extracted in honour of the presence of the servant, but it was delivered as rudely as it could be. Nurse Aggie perceived the temper of the speaker at once.

"Never you mind him, my dear," she said (she was often accustomed to mention Bertie before his face as if he were a dummy or imbecile), "I'll light up the candles and bring in your tea at once, and you must make a good meal to-night. Miss Nelly, for it's nearly an hour behind time, and I've got some of the most beautiful dough-nuts for you possible."

"Thank you, nurse!" said the girl, trying to speak cheerfully, though she felt as if her heart was breaking; "and make Bertie some nice toast too, and let us have the lights at once, for the room looks dreadfully dull as it is;" and in another minute she

had bathed her face and smoothed her hair, and was making things comfortable in the sitting-room in her usual manner.

When the tea was ready, and she carried Bertie his cup, she stooped and kissed him. He pushed her away coldly.

"Won't you even kiss me, Bertie?" she said, sorrowfully.

"I don't wish to kiss you, or to speak to you."

"But may I not explain?"

"Explain nothing; no explanation can alter my opinion of what you have done."

She sat down to her own tea without another word; she felt that he was in one of those moods when it was worse than useless to contend with him. But when the meal was cleared away and the blinds were drawn down, and they were quite alone, Nelly approached her brother's sofa again, and knelt down by his side. His head was obstinately turned from her, but she placed a soft hand on either cheek, and with gentle force compelled him to look her in the face.

"Bertie, darling," she said, firmly, "there must not be this silence between us; however vexed and disappointed you may be with me, you can at least do me the justice to tell me so. I can guess, of course, why you are angry, but even if you think that I have been wrong, remember what we are to one another: own brother and sister; almost like the same person, Bertie; and remember how I love you, and"—He had tried to wrench his head from her hands, but finding that beyond him, he fixed his sternly-set features upon hers, and regarded her with a gaze of stone.

"But *do* you love me?" he said, incredulously.

Nelly started backward in her surprise, for never before had she heard him cast a doubt upon their mutual affection.

"Oh! don't be cruel, Bertie!" she cried; "you know I do, as much as you love me."

He gave a short laugh, expressive of disbelief in her attachment or distress.

"You have not given me much reason to credit it lately," he replied.

"But how?" she demanded; "tell me in what way."

"Why, in every way," said Robert Brooke, his longing to accuse and condemn her getting the better of his unwillingness to speak. "With regard to Monkton, you have done nothing but thwart and cross me. You have drawn back, and wished me to draw back, from receiving his presents; you altogether opposed the plan of

our going to live at Hilstone ; and now you have crowned your obstinacy by actually being insane enough to refuse his offer of marriage. I could not have believed it except from his own lips—your conduct is perfectly incredible to me. Why, do you know what you have done ? I cannot imagine of what you can have been thinking.”

“ But, Bertie, I do not care for Dr Monkton, not in that way ; he is not my choice.”

“ Your choice ! what business has a beggar with choosing in a matter like this ?”

“ I am a *woman*,” replied Nelly, her breast heaving with wounded pride at the contemptuous tone in which her brother had spoken ; “ and however poor, every woman has at least the privilege of rejecting the man whom she does not wish to marry.”

“ The privilege of rejecting thousands a year, when you have scarcely bread to eat—a mighty privilege, truly—and one of which you have not been slow to avail yourself. Yes, you *are* a woman, and, like most of your sex when left to themselves, you’ve made a nice hash of your prospects. Only, unfortunately in your case, you have the ‘privilege’ of dragging me down with you. Here I am—a wretched cripple—with scarcely a pleasure left in life, and no money to procure the few I might enjoy ; and you, my twin sister, who have it in your power, actually in your grasp, to give me all the comforts I need (to say nothing of having them for yourself also), and to gratify some absurd whim or scruple of your own, you throw the chance on one side, as if it were nothing—absolutely nothing. And after that you expect me to believe in your *love* for me. Faugh !”

The tears, which none of the afternoon’s events had brought to Nelly’s eyes, now rose thickly. Yet she was dignified throughout her distress.

“ Bertie !” she said, solemnly, “ if my life—if the conduct of my whole life has not convinced you that I love you, nothing that I can say now would be of any avail ; but I call Heaven to witness that your happiness is dearer to me than my own, and that I have always given two thoughts for you to one for myself.”

“ Pray how many thoughts did you give to me or my happiness this afternoon when you so decidedly refused Dr Monkton’s proposal ?” he sneered.

“ Would it add to your happiness, dear, to see me married to a man for whom I don’t care ? I was exceedingly sorry that Dr

Monkton should speak to me as he did to-day. I was afraid that he might do so, and that is the reason why I avoided his society, and felt shy of taking his presents. But it grieved me very much to have to refuse him, Bertie, more than I can tell you, particularly when I thought of what you would lose in his acquaintanceship."

Her emotion was now so evident, that her brother began to think that after all, perhaps, coaxing might have more effect upon her than anger or sarcasm. So he asked, in a gentler tone—

"What is your objection to Monkton, Nelly? You have always professed to like him."

"And so I have liked him, and so I do like him as a friend; but that is very different to liking him in any other way."

"What do you know about 'any other way.' You have not got a prior attachment, I suppose, for Tom or Jack Weston, or any of the ploughboys."

To this speech Nelly would not deign to make any reply, but she quitted her kneeling position, and took a chair by Robert's couch.

"What on earth can you find fault with in Monkton, I ask again? He is young, clever, good-looking, and a perfect gentleman, besides being able to offer you such a position as you will never have the chance of refusing more. Why, from your own description, his establishment in Hilstone must be conducted in first-rate style. You would have carriage and horses and men-servants at your beck and call, and yet you pretend that you prefer to remain in these poky rooms with old Aggie to wait upon you. I cannot understand it."

"No rooms seem poky to me, darling, when you are in them, and as to servants, Bertie, I ask nothing better than to be your own servant till my life's end, if I can only see you contented and happy."

"That's just like you," he replied, quickly; "you profess yourself willing to do anything for me, and when it comes to the point, you do nothing. You know that a life down here is killing me by inches, and yet you would prefer to see me die or go mad, to making a little sacrifice for my sake. It ought not to be a sacrifice at all, but if it is, why can't you act up to your professions?"

At these words, the remembrance of what the doctor had said of Bertie's state of health and mind flashed back upon Nelly, and she burst into tears. Would he die kept in the country, or become morbidly inclined? Was it possible that Heaven would force her to accept either this alternative or the other?

"Come, Nelly, dear," exclaimed Robert Brooke, holding out his arms to her, "I am sure that you will think twice before you

decide this question. Monkton has not taken your answer as final, by any means ; he is a great deal too fond of you for that, and requires but a hint from you or myself to bring him back again. I know you love me, you little silly," he continued, kissing the tears from off her wet cheeks, and pressing her hands within his own. "I know you love your poor old crooked boy, and would be miserable to see him so."

"Oh ! I should indeed, I should indeed, Bertie," sobbed the poor child, as she clung about him, "for who have I in the world to care for but yourself ?"

"Well ! then say that I may write to Monkton by to-morrow's post, and tell him that you have altered your mind, and are ready to marry him."

"To *marry* him ! Oh no, Bertie !" and a shudder ran through the form which he embraced. "Oh ! brother, don't ask me to marry him. I will work for you, darling ; I will wait on and tend you all the days of my life ; I will go with you to London, or anywhere else you choose, but don't ask me to marry that man, for I can't do it."

His arms relaxed their grasp of her waist and shoulders, and she felt that he had thrust her beyond the pale of his sympathy again. It was in vain that Nelly took up the apparently lifeless members and replaced them in their former fond position. They fell to his side as often as she put them there, and tired out by the emotion, and excitement, and disappointment she had passed through, she laid down her head upon the end of the sofa, and cried bitterly.

"For God's sake, don't stop there making that noise," exclaimed Robert Brooke, impatiently, as he heard her ; "if there is one thing above another that I hate, it is a woman's whining, and particularly when it is all put on for effect. If you can't be less of a hypocrite, Nelly, you'll drive me to bed."

She rose quickly, and drew her handkerchief across her eyes. She knew that her tears were not false ; she knew that they had scalded her eyeballs as they rose, and had been only born of weariness to find she was fighting her battle so badly ; but whatever it cost her, she would trouble him with them no longer. The shadow had fallen between them again ; and unless she could immediately refute what she had said, and give Bertie the promise he desired, she felt it would be lost time to try and raise it. As she sat a little apart from him, bending over her needle-work, she asked herself over and over if it were possible that

she should ever end by saying "yes." She pictured her brother's gratitude and thanks if she did so, and his subsequent happiness and improved health, and acknowledged that the vision was a tempting one—for *him*—but what for herself?

"Oh! if it had only been anything else," thought Nelly; "if he had asked me to cut off my leg, or my arm—how little it would seem in comparison—but to marry the doctor!"

She had thought of it so little, and wished for it so much less, that it almost seemed as if she had been desired to marry a stranger.

She was roused from her reverie, by finding that her brother was on his feet and ringing the bell. She started to her own.

"Why did you not ask me to do it for you, Bertie?"

He made her no answer; but sat down again upon his sofa, and when the old nurse appeared he said sullenly—

"Light a candle, and help me to bed."

The candlesticks were placed on a side table; Aggie lighted one, and stood ready to attend her master.

"Mayn't I come too, Bertie?" asked Nelly, humbly, as he rose to leave the room; but he thrust away her proffered aid, and placed his hand on the nurse's shoulder instead. But Nelly was not to be daunted, she sprang forward and placed herself in the doorway.

"Good night, *brother*," she said, lovingly, as he approached her. She thought that the term would be sure to appeal to his affection.

"Good night, good night," he said, hurriedly, but without any attempt at a caress. "You have a wonderful faculty, Nelly, for doing the wrong things at the wrong times," and he passed into his bedroom.

Nelly looked at the closed door for a second, as if she half expected it would re-open; and then returned to her needlework, and finished the task she had set herself.

But after Aggie had fallen into her first sleep that night she was roused by a sound from the other bed which very much resembled quiet weeping.

"Miss Nelly, my bird, is that you?" quoth the old woman.

There was no answer, and the sound was immediately stifled beneath the bed-clothes, but so unsatisfactorily that Aggie struck a light and hobbled across the room to disinter her nurseling's face, hot and blurred with tears.

"Now, what's the matter with you, my pet?" inquired the nurse, as she wiped the girl's wet eyes, and smoothed back her

tossed and tangled hair. "Whatever's Master Robert been a saying, to make you take on like this?"

"Oh, never mind," said Nelly, as she turned her head to one side, and tried to make light of Aggie's discovery, "it's nothing, I'm stupid, and cross, and tired, that's all. Now do put out that light and go back to your bed, and I shall be asleep in less than ten minutes."

"It's all very well to try and deceive me," muttered old Aggie, as she obeyed orders, "but if that's not some of Master Robert's doing, I never see none. His temper's as crooked as himself, and he'll worrit my lamb into her grave before he's done with her, unless she finds a way to escape him. The Lord send that she may!" and with this pious ejaculation Aggie snuffed out the candle with her fingers, and once more retired to her couch.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR RAY IS ENLISTED INTO BERTIE'S SERVICE.

ROBERT BROOKE's motive in persuading his sister to accept Dr Monkton as a husband, was not entirely a selfish one, although at the first flush it may seem to have been so; he had been bitterly disappointed at the news with which his friend had greeted him after his interview with Nelly in the garden; but almost as much so for her sake as for his own. He had refused to believe that the hasty decision of so inexperienced a girl could be a final one, and he had resolved, by some means or other, to force her to change her mind. Knowing how potent his will usually was with her, he had dismissed Dr Monkton with a confident prophecy that in the course of a week or ten days, he would receive a letter to say that Nelly had repented of her thoughtless answer. And the doctor being very much enamoured, had assured Robert Brooke that at the first intimation of such a fact, he would see him at his sister's feet again. Thus the men had parted: each resolved that, whether by fair means or foul, if it lay in his power, he would bring the girl to reason.

As has been recorded, the brother commenced his tactics at once, and was exceedingly annoyed to find that the warfare was likely to prove a harder one than he had anticipated. In his pragmatical ignorance he had not been used to give women credit for much strength of purpose; but he knew that the sex had a name for obstinacy in respect to its love affairs; and Nelly must

not be obstinate in this case: there was too much at stake for both of them, for her to be able to afford to indulge in such a luxury.

In thinking and acting in this manner, it did not once occur to Robert Brooke that he was trying to make his sister sell herself.

Had there been near him at that time any right-judging person, bold enough to place the matter before him in this point of view, he would probably have been as shocked at the notion of sacrificing Nelly in marriage, as if it had been proposed to him to offer her fair flesh as a holocaust. But there was no such friend at hand, and Robert's selfishness would not permit him to view the future in any light but his own. He knew that Nelly was young and very ignorant,—that she had rusticated in Little Bickton until she had grown to wish for nothing better, and he believed that she was quite unaware of the harm she was doing herself and him by refusing so advantageous an offer,—that she was, in fact, like the cock of the fable, who found a pearl on his dung-hill and sighed for a barley-corn instead.

He had always had a great ambition that his sister should marry well; but he had entertained little hopes of it until Nigel Brooke visited them at the Farm Cottage. When that hope died away, his depression visibly increased: when it was revived in the appearance of Dr Monkton, it was as though the blue had once more broken out through his gloomy sky. To be disappointed a second time, and for no stringent reason, appeared to Robert Brooke too hard to be borne. Apart from all the advantages to be derived from such a union, he had a great wish to see Nelly married to the Hilstone doctor. The fact of the proximity of that place to Orpington Chase, instead of being a detriment, but served to heap additional fuel on the flame of his desire. They who had actually made his sister and himself what they were, should see them placed in a position of importance; far above the reach of all necessity, even revelling in the same luxuries as themselves, and that without the smallest aid on their parts, without taking a tithe of charity from their hands.

He had dreamt of himself, sitting in a carriage by Nelly's side, and seeing her pass the inmates of the Chase without the least sign of recognition: he had fancied her pretty figure (and Robert, with all his faults, fondly admired the outward charms of his twin sister) clothed in stuffs as rich as those worn by the mistress of Orpington, and far richer than any which she had presumed to bestow upon her orphan niece. He had thought of the dinner parties which "Mrs Monkton, of Hilstone," would be

expected to give, and how much her sweet blushing face, and the native grace of her manners would be admired, notwithstanding that ignorance of the ways of society which her country education had given her no chance of correcting.

And mixed up with all this splendour had been a vision of himself; not so much partaking of it (for he still shrunk from the idea of publicity) as viewing it and glorying in it from a little world of his own—a little world, which comprised not so many intellectual pleasures, perhaps, as the means of locomotion and attending public entertainments, with more pocket-money than he at present enjoyed, and an unlimited supply of brandy and cigars. And now this pretty dream was all dashed to the ground: and for what? The whim of a girl who did not know her own mind! He was certain that Nelly had no previous attachment, and that whatever she chose to say now, she had had at one time no hesitation in confessing that she thought Dr Monkton both handsome and agreeable. From what then could her refusal of his offer arise but some childish wayward fancy out of which she must be reasoned?

For it was not only the personal qualities of the superior position of the Hilstone doctor which made a marriage with him so desirable a thing for Nelly Brooke. It was not only that her lot was cast where such another chance might never be presented to her: had she lived in the gayest of towns, and been surrounded by admirers, there still remained sufficiently good reasons in Robert's eyes to render her rejection of such an offer madness. She might be ignorant of these reasons—he knew that she was; but he had no such excuse, and his mind dwelt upon this fact until he had persuaded himself that he was performing a sacred duty, instead of merely following his own inclinations, in using all his endeavours to bring his sister round to his own way of thinking. It is so easy to persuade ourselves that what we wish is right. When he rose on the morning after the conversation between them, detailed in the last chapter, he was determined that, either by stratagem or otherwise, he would make her yield to what he considered advisable, and he had come to the conclusion that it would be best to try the straightforward system first. Poor little Nelly had not much chance against either plan! When she entered her brother's room that morning, half expecting to be ordered thence again, she was fairly melted by the willingness with which he accepted her timidly-proffered aid, and the oblivion into which he appeared to have cast their difference of the night before. The simple fool was almost ready, at such condescension,

to fall upon his neck and tell him to order the goings of her life for her, and had the stakes been less heavy, after some such fashion, the whole matter would doubtless have been settled. But her nature recoiled too much at the alternative to permit her to yield so easily. She was very grateful, though, for Bertie's renewed affection, and they went lovingly into the breakfast-room together, and spent a happy hour, during which no allusion was made to the topic under dispute, before Nelly's household duties called her away to help old Aggie with the preparations for dinner.

"And what will you do, darling, till I am back again?" she said, before she left her brother.

"I should like to go out on the common for a little while, if you can get a boy to push the chair for me, Nelly."

"Shall I come, Bertie!" she said, eagerly; "I daresay Aggie will be able to manage the dinner alone."

"No, thank you, my dear; don't trouble yourself; I would rather have a boy. I have not passed a very good night, and should like to be alone and quiet for an hour or so."

A cloud passed over her face when he refused her services and alluded to his need of rest, for she felt herself to blame that her brother had not slept well. But she procured the services of one of the farm lads, and seeing Bertie start in his Bath chair, with a cheerful farewell, returned contentedly to her household labours.

This was at ten o'clock in the morning, but half-past one sounded, and two was on the point of following suit, and still there were no signs of the return of her brother's chair.

"Hadn't I better dish up, Miss Nelly?" inquired Aggie, not pleased at the delay in the dinner; "that steak will be as hard as wood, if I keep it on the fire any longer, and the potatoes is all of a mash, as it is."

"Well, I really don't know what to say, Aggie; it will be no use putting it on the table till Bertie is back. I wish we had stewed the steak as you proposed, instead of frying it. However, just wait a minute, and I'll run out on the common, and see if I cannot catch sight of him anywhere."

But the precaution was of no avail—far and wide as Nelly could look, the common presented no object less familiar than the flocks of geese with their callow broods, waddling about the pond in its centre; or the village children trooping back to afternoon school. She waited for another half-hour, and then, with Aggie, made an uncomfortable meal on the toughened steak and

watery potatoes, and began to consider what she could best get ready to await Bertie's uncertain return.

"Can anything possibly have happened?" she said to Mrs Weston, about four o'clock, as she entered the farm-kitchen. "Bertie has never been so late before; I am getting quite uneasy."

"Then you may spare yourself that trouble, Nelly," was the smiling rejoinder, "for I hear the wheels of his chair grating on the gravel at this moment."

She flew to the front door, and was waiting on the steps to receive him.

"Bertie! where have you been? we thought you were lost; why, you must be perfectly famished."

"Neither lost nor famished," he said, cheerfully, as she helped him to leave the chair; "and I had half a mind not to come home at all, until to-morrow morning. What would you have said to that, Nelly?"

She had very seldom seen him so gay in his demeanour; his voice and manner were almost merry, and she caught the welcome infection.

"I'm sure I don't know. Run about, I suppose, like the old woman in the song, crying out, 'I've lost my chee-ild.' But where *have* you been, Bertie? I am really anxious to hear."

They had passed into their room by this time, and old Aggie had followed them, clamorous to ascertain if Master Robert would have his chop at once, or wait till tea-time.

"Oh, no! hang your chops!" he replied; "I want nothing—I have been to the vicarage, and had luncheon there."

"To Mr Ray's," exclaimed Nelly—"not really?"

Her brother and his guardian's family had usually so little in common, that to volunteer a visit to Bickton Proper was an unprecedented occurrence on Bertie's part. But he did not appear, or choose to appear, to share her astonishment, for all he replied was—

"Yes, really, and a first-rate luncheon into the bargain. I was quite delighted to be able for once to cut Aggie's hashes."

At this old Aggie, deeply offended, turned abruptly, and marched back into the kitchen.

"You shouldn't speak so, dear," said Nelly, gently; "she does her best for you. But why did you go to the vicarage, Bertie? What made you think of it—and why did you not tell me of your intention beforehand?"

She had guessed intuitively why he had gone there, directly she

heard the fact; and, as she put the question, brow and bosom became ruddy with expectation of the answer.

But she need not have dreaded an immediate explanation. Her brother was too wary to frighten her before it was necessary.

"Simply because I did not think anything about it until I found myself on the road, and it was such a beautiful morning that it lured me on. Come, Nell! help me off with this coat, and let me lie down for a while. I am quite stiff with sitting upright so long."

She did as he desired her, and was silent, but she could not accept the excuse which he had made. She was sure that his visit to the vicarage had been premeditated, and concerned herself and Dr Monkton; and the more cheerful Bertie appeared, the lower her spirits ebbed: until the dusk of the June evening had fallen, and a familiar footstep in the passage was followed by the entrance of Mr Ray. Then all Nelly's vague doubts resolved themselves into a certain dread; and she knew that her guardian had been enlisted into Bertie's service, and she had two opponents to contend with instead of one. She did not even seek to postpone or avert a fate which she felt to be inevitable, but sat alternately blushing and paling beneath the vicar's glances; and only felt a little more nervous and uncomfortable when Bertie made some frivolous excuse to leave the room, and she knew that the moment had come.

"Mr Ray," she exclaimed, with a scarlet face, directly the door was closed, as though to anticipate an attack were the best mode to withstand it, "I know quite well what you are going to say to me—but it is of no use."

"And what may I have been going to say to you, Nelly?" asked the vicar, gently.

Then the girl felt that she had done a very silly thing, and she stammered as she attempted to reply to her guardian's question—and from stammering she broke down—and from breaking down it was an easy transition to cry. All Mr Ray's fatherly feelings were excited by Nelly's tears; he changed his seat to the one next her own, and took her cold hand in his, and stroked her pretty bowed-down head.

"My dear little girl," he said, kindly, "you may be quite sure that if I can help it, I shall never say anything to vex you. If, as I conclude from your words, you think that my intention in coming here this evening is to remonstrate on your refusal of Dr Monkton's proposal, you are quite right. Robert has told me all about it

(and to your guardian he was justified in doing so), and I cannot help agreeing with him that it will be most injudicious if you show any haste in deciding on so important a matter. It is part of my duty, Nelly, to look out for your interests, and to reason with you when you will not consult them for yourself. You have received an offer of marriage such as any girl might be proud to accept, and such as (if you have no other attachment) you will be very foolish, not to say wrong, to refuse."

"But I don't—I don't think I care about him—so very much," said Nelly, between her sobs.

"What did you say, my dear?" inquired the vicar, bending close to her.

"I don't think—I am afraid—I'm not in love with him," she repeated, amending her sentence.

As he caught the phrase, Mr Ray smiled.

"And what do you know about love, my child?" he asked, quietly.

He was thoroughly good and honest and kind, this vicar of Bickton Proper; but he could not boast of a romantic temperament, having married at an early age (simply because he was told that it was proper a clergyman should have a wife) a young woman whose sole attraction consisted in her indomitable virtue, and her disbelief in the existence of the Divorce Court, except for such as were utterly lost and depraved, and unlike the rest of mankind in any of their thoughts or feelings. Neither Mr nor Mrs Ray had much faith in the power of temptation, because it had never been thrown in their way.

Mildly, and equably, and prosaically had their lives glided on, and they had reared their children, and revered each other, and could not believe it possible that there were married couples less happily and safely situated than themselves.

The vicar did not deny there was such a thing as love, and often misdirected; but he held a doctrine very common amongst men, namely, that a woman who does not grow to love the husband who treats her with consideration and respect, must be worse than the generality of her sex; and he knew that Nelly Brooke was better than the generality; and so he was satisfied that he could not be doing very wrong in persuading her to take a step which would add so greatly to her own and her brother's advantage.

Whereas, so little has consideration and respect and all the other humdrum duties to do with it, that love itself is of no avail,

unless a corresponding feeling has spontaneously sprung in the heart it labours to attract.

We soil, and degrade, and villify it ! trample its pristine purity beneath the dirt of our human nature, but do what we will, we cannot unmake Love. It still remains the one free, unapproachable passion of the universe !

But Nelly Brooke was too ignorant to be able to laugh at the vicar's honestly-put question, and tell him that in such a matter her heart could direct her more efficiently than all his middle-age wisdom. She had a great reverence and respect for Mr Ray's opinion, and the knowledge that he thought she would be foolish to reject Dr Monkton's proposal, made her tremble, but not smile.

"You can't know what you are talking about, Nelly !" continued her guardian, gently. "You have had no experience of love ; and the idea of it to be derived from books of imagination is always exaggerated. The only lasting and true affection is that which is based upon esteem. Do you not agree with me that Dr Monkton possesses all the qualities best calculated to make a woman happy. Is he not agreeable, and kind, and benevolent ? Added to which, he is rich and handsome, young and clever ! Good heavens ! what can the girl want more ? I only wish there were five other such suitors waiting for admittance at the vicarage, at this present moment. I'd engage they wouldn't wait long ;" and the vicar chuckled over the mere idea. "But there are other and stronger reasons even than the attainment of your own happiness, Nelly, which should make you think twice before you reject Dr Monkton," he resumed more gravely ; "there is a weighty cause"——

"I know it !" she said, quickly, raising her weary face, and staring at the vicar through the fast increasing twilight. "I know it, Mr Ray, well, and it has haunted me ever since. Is it—can it be sufficient—do you think I should be doing wrong for that reason alone, if I persist in refusing this offer ?"

She was thinking of her brother's state of health, but though the vicar could not see the imploring eyes she directed towards him, he could hear the anxiety which her voice expressed, and he mistook the meaning of it.

"Have you guessed it, then, my poor child ?" he said, more tenderly than before ; "well, in my mind, that reason should be sufficient of itself to balance your choice."

Nelly's heart grew suddenly chill—what could the vicar mean except that Bertie's death might otherwise some day lie at her door.

With each word he uttered, the hedge which was growing up around her appeared to gain in height and substance. Was she to be hemmed in on every side? Was there no outlet by which she could conscientiously escape?

"We do not wish to hurry or distress you, Nelly," continued her guardian; "but it is right that these things should be put before you, and that you should be encouraged to consider them."

"Yes! yes! I understand," she said, in a voice too calm to be natural, as every moment increased the dull sickening pain which encircled her heart.

"And you will promise me, Nelly, to think over your answer again?"

"Yes, Mr Ray; I promise."

"Well, let us talk no more of it at present," he continued, cheerfully. "Suppose you ring for candles, and call Bertie back, and let us have a rubber at whist together before we separate."

She rose at his bidding, and did as he desired her, and took her part in the game which followed with forced quietude, as though no troubling doubts disturbed her spirit; but when she laid her weary little head down upon her pillow that night, Nelly Brooke almost wished (or she would have done so had it not been for Bertie's sake) that the question which vexed her might be settled by her death.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NELLY IS BESET ON EVERY SIDE.

"ARE you unhappy, my dear?" said Mrs Weston, two days after the vicar's visit, as she laid her hand kindly upon Nelly's shoulder.

She had met her by accident in the kitchen, and been immediately attracted by her heavy eyes and pale complexion. The days were gone by when Nelly flew to Mrs Weston with all her little troubles, but the touch of the farmer's wife seemed so familiar, and her voice and manner so kind, that the girl's heart, sore and perplexed with its inward trouble, responded at once.

She had no woman friend but this, in whom she might confide, and though she knew that Mrs Weston's wisdom was more of the heart than the head, she believed in her sympathy and craved for it. And she answered her question eagerly.

"Oh! *indeed* I am, Mrs Weston, not only unhappy, but miserably worried and uncertain about something! How I wish

I could tell you all ! perhaps you would advise me what is best to do."

"Of course I would, my dear, to the best of my ability, and if it will in the least relieve your mind to confide your trouble to me, I see no difficulty in your doing so. Mr Weston will be out this evening, and I shall be alone in the parlour. Come to me for an hour after your own tea. It is long since you and I have had a talk together."

Nelly acceded to this proposal almost gratefully. It was a comfort even to look forward to the prospect of such a relief, for her perplexities were increasing. She had had another stormy interview that morning with Bertie, who, having imagined that the vicar's opinion must be omnipotent with his sister, chose, after she had been made aware of it, to consider her continued opposition to their mutual wishes, as a fresh grievance. He had accused her of selfishness and folly before ; but wilful obstinacy was now added to the category of her sins. It was in vain that Nelly told him she felt no inclination for a marriage with Dr Monkton ; she could not honestly say that she hated or even disliked the man, and nothing short of such a confession would have silenced her brother.

He had only ceased from his vehement attempts at making her change her mind, to relapse into one of his old fits of sullenness, in the midst of which he had ordered his Bath chair to be brought round, and left her to go she knew not whither, perhaps again to consult the vicar.

Abandoned to her own thoughts thus, Nelly hardly knew what to think of the matter, or how it would end. She fully acknowledged to herself all the advantages to be derived from such a match ; she felt how nice it would be never again to have to consider twice before she laid out an extra shilling, or to see Bertie's face grow dark, and hear his peevish remonstrances when she had no money which she could possibly spare him.

She felt, as other girls, reared in poverty, would feel at the idea of possessing a house and carriage of her own, and of being well dressed and well attended for the first time in her life.

She was not even free from the childish ambition to wear a wedding-ring, and to be addressed by the honourable title of "Mrs," nor from the womanly one of filling the place for which God had designed her, and of seeing a child of her own upon her bosom.

And above all, she longed for these anticipated comforts

and pleasures, nor for herself, but for Bertie. And yet, when she considered that in order to obtain them she must first become the wife of Dr Monkton, they all seemed to fade away as if by magic, and be nothing, whilst she could hardly say why. She did not dislike him; on the contrary, she considered him (in her girlish language) to be very "nice" in every respect; but still, whenever she thought of him as a husband, something invisible, yet to be felt, seemed to draw her backwards. An instinct which her nature confessed, but could not account for, urged her to turn away from the mere idea; but since, search as she would, Nelly could find no good reason why it should be so, she despaired of persuading herself that it would be right to follow it. When she entered Mrs Weston's parlour on that evening, her spirits were still very low. She had not seen her brother then for several hours, and had taken her tea alone, and had full leisure for pondering over her puzzle, which seemed more intricate the more she examined it. She had a piece of work in her hands, for Nelly Brooke was a woman who never permitted happy or sorrowful thoughts to interfere long with her occupation. Her active mind made employment a necessity rather than a choice, and the greatest cruelty one could have inflicted on her, would have been to force her to be idle.

Mrs Weston, as she had promised, was quite alone. Nelly sat down quietly on a low chair by her side, and went on with her stitching, waiting for her friend to make the first allusion to the purpose of their meeting.

"Well, Nelly, are you no better since I saw you?" inquired Mrs Weston, breaking the ice at once.

Nelly shook her head mournfully.

"Tell me all about it, dear girl. It would ease your mind to talk it over, and I can half guess it has something to do with the handsome doctor and his frequent visits to Bickton. Eh, Nelly, am I not right?"

Thus encouraged, and believing that Mrs Weston must already have divined the truth, Nelly, amidst much blushing, poured forth her tale. But the reality was very different to what the farmer's wife had imagined it to be.

She thought that the girl had fallen (or fancied herself to have fallen) in love with Dr Monkton and was miserable in consequence; and was quite prepared to revive her drooping spirits with the assurance that the attachment was evidently mutual, and that everything would come right in time. She had never conceived it possible that the doctor could have made

Nelly a proposal of marriage, and that her unhappiness arose from the fact that she did not wish to accept it ; and as the marvellous account was brought to a conclusion, Mrs Weston put her hand under the narrator's chin, and turned the flushed face up to meet her own, which was full of serious surprise.

"If you were giving to joking, Nelly, I should think you were joking with me now. Are you really in earnest?"

"Yes, really, Mrs Weston, and I can't think why people should consider it strange. Every one has not the same taste."

"But why do you dislike the doctor, Nelly?"

"I never said that I disliked him," was the quick reply.

"Or have such an objection to him, then? it is much the same thing."

"I have no objection to him either, that I know of."

"You do not dislike him, or know of any particular objection," said Mrs Weston, with solemn astonishment, as she released Nelly's honest face, "and yet you wish to refuse such an establishment as he offers you? My dear child, you must be silly. Have you examined your own heart well on the subject. Are you sure that you know what you do feel about it?"

"I am not sure of anything," said Nelly, impatiently, "except that everybody is against me. I don't even know that I've got a heart; or if I have, it must be Bertie's, for I care for no one else; and cannot imagine I shall ever do so."

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed the matron in a voice of genteel horror, "if you are going to compare the affection which you may expect to feel for a gentleman who honours you by the offer of his hand, with that which you naturally entertain towards your brother, of *course* you will be disappointed. You know nothing about love, yourself, Nelly, remember, but *I* can tell you it is a very different thing to that."

"So Mr Ray said," remarked the girl, thoughtfully, as she gazed upon the ground through her long, black eyelashes; "he said I could know nothing of love, and no more I do. I wonder if I am deceiving myself, and if what I feel for Dr Monkton is really *all*"——

She was speaking more to herself than to her friend, but Mrs Weston caught up the words.

"How *all*, my dear; what do you mean?"

"All that a woman can feel for a man," replied Nelly, in the same voice. "I have thought it would be so much more than liking, or even loving a person. I used to dream that when it came, it would be *everything*."

"It is very well there is no one but me to hear you talk, Nelly," said Mrs Weston, good-naturedly, although her prudery was really a little startled by her young friend's words. "Of course it is more than mere liking or loving a person *after* you are married to him. It is quite right and proper that a husband should be everything to his wife; but we don't talk of such things beforehand, my dear. Such ideas are what constitute boldness and forwardness in a young woman."

"Well, perhaps I *am* bold," replied Nelly, ingenuously; "but do you really think, Mrs Weston, that they come afterwards—the love and the clinging, I mean—will they come after marriage if I do not feel them before?"

Mrs Weston glanced round to see if the door were securely shut.

"My dear child, you have such strange ideas, you make me feel quite nervous lest any one should overhear us! Yes, of course, Nelly; if it is necessary for a young woman to experience such feelings, they will be sent her in good time. But if a girl respects and esteems the man whom she marries (as I am sure you have every reason to do with regard to the doctor), she has a better foundation for happiness than any such romantic sentiments as you mention. When I was about your age, Nelly, I happened to be placed in very similar circumstances."

"Oh, do tell me all about it, Mrs Weston, from beginning to end," exclaimed the girl, turning impulsively to clasp the hand of her friend. "I think if I heard other women say what they felt in such a case, I should be better able to judge of my own state of mind."

"I was one of fourteen children," replied Mrs Weston, as she caressingly handled the mass of rust-coloured hair which lay across her knee, "and my father was a country clergyman, who had hard work to provide us all with the necessaries of life. I was reared in as secluded a place as you have been, although at the other side of England, and in much poorer circumstances. My sisters and I had seldom sufficient clothing during the cold weather, but we had been brought up like cottage children, and were used to privations, and we had been taught that so long as we had enough to eat we must be content. There was a celebrated trout-stream running through my father's parish, which used sometimes, during the fishing season, to attract gentlemen anglers from the nearest town. One summer, a gentleman from London, of the name of Elwood, accidentally made our acquaintance whilst he was fishing in this stream, and of his own accord

he followed it up. He used to ride over from Juxbridge (that was the name of the market town where he was staying) continually, and spend his afternoons at the parsonage, and after he had done so for about a month, he asked my father's leave to pay his addresses to his fourth daughter, meaning myself. My poor father was elated at the idea of such a marriage for me ; he had ascertained that Mr Elwood was a rich merchant in the city, and bore an excellent character, and both he and my mother seemed to consider I was the luckiest girl possible.

"But I was young at that time, Nelly, just eighteen, quite disregardful of poverty and its many evils, and full of hope, and vague, misty dreams of a rose-coloured future. And Mr Elwood was nearly forty, and seemed an elderly man in my eyes, and he was stout besides, and had a red face, and I was obstinately determined not to marry him. It was in vain that my parents argued with me, and pointed out all the advantages I was throwing away. I was sure, in my own mind, that the fairy prince who was to give me all such, and more besides, was coming some day, and decided that I would rather wait for him. So I dismissed Mr Elwood, or rather, my father, with many an honest regret, dismissed him at my request : and shortly afterwards we heard that he had left Juxbridge."

"But surely you did quite right, Mrs Weston," exclaimed Nelly, with sparkling eyes ; "it is just what I should have done myself. You did not love Mr Elwood, and how could you have married him?"

"I did what I bitterly regretted for long afterwards, whether I loved him or not, my dear. In a few months from that time my father died, and my mother was left with her fourteen children to struggle through life as she best might. Then it was that I felt the effects of my hasty decision. They all turned round upon me ; I heard nothing, from morning till night, but what might have been done for the whole family if I had only married Mr Elwood, and had been sufficiently unselfish as to consider others' interests as well as my own. Even my mother joined in the general hue-and-cry, until at last I was thankful to leave home and escape from their reproaches."

"Was it for that reason, then, that you became a governess ?" inquired Nelly.

"No ! I can hardly say that ; for anyway I should have been obliged to earn my own bread ; but I would rather have gone out to service as a menial than have longer endured the persecution I met with from my own people."

"Or to have become the wife of Mr Elwood?" interposed her listener quickly.

"I cannot agree with you there, Nelly, although it sounds very unromantic to confess it; but by that time I was almost as sorry for my thoughtlessness as my family could be. You must experience *real* necessity, my dear, and *real* sorrow in this world, before you are fit to decide how much you can willingly relinquish for the sake of independence. I had reason, and not long afterwards, to believe that had I not been so hasty in rejecting Mr Elwood as a husband, I should have grown to love him dearly, notwithstanding his stout figure and red face. And it happened thus, Nelly. After I was deprived of my first situation, which was in London, I suffered for a time great privations. I could not find employment, and I was too proud to go home and be a burden to my mother, or to ask her for any assistance. So I lived on a mere crust, just dragging out my life from day to day. At last I heard of another situation, and was likely to obtain it; but more references were required than I could produce, and I had not a friend in London. Suddenly I thought of Mr Elwood: I knew that he was married by that time, and I felt sure that he would at least have no objection to attest to my respectability. I had no difficulty in finding his address, for he was well known in the City; so I summoned up courage to go and ask for him. What a beautiful house it was to be sure, Nelly! I had never been inside one so grand in my life before; and the furniture and the servants were all in keeping with the house. When I found myself there I was half frightened at what I had done; but I need not have been. Poor dear Mr Elwood was so kind to me. He came running down-stairs directly he heard my name, and led me into a beautiful dining-room, and when he learned the business upon which I had come, the tears came into his eyes—they did, indeed. He promised to do all that I required, and then he took me up and introduced me to his wife, and they showed me their baby—how proud they were of it!—and made me stay to luncheon with them, and were both as kind as they could be. But what I particularly wanted to tell you is this: I had partly informed them of my circumstances, and I suppose they guessed I must be very poor, for as I was going away, Mr Elwood followed me down-stairs, and putting something into my hands, said that for my dead father's sake I must not deprive him of the satisfaction of assisting me. I knew that it was money, and so it was—a note for fifty pounds. My foolish pride rose at that,

and I told him that I could not and would not take it from him. And what do you think he said, Nelly? 'I do not think you need hesitate to oblige me in so small a matter, since you refused to accept all that I possess.' And the tears came into his eyes again; I thought it so generous of him to remind me of it at such a time, and when most men would have felt ashamed of the remembrance; but he was not."

"And did you take it, Mrs Weston?"

"Yes! dear, I did, at last, to avoid giving him pain; but of course it prevented my applying to him for assistance again. I have often heard of him since, though, and I know that he is happy and prosperous, and has a large family of children. I don't wish to complain of my present lot, Nelly, but I am sure I should have been a fortunate woman if I had trusted to my to my parents' judgment, and married Mr Elwood."

"And what next?" demanded Nelly, with interest.

"What next, dear child? Why, such a weary length of uncomfortable years, that I do not even care to look back upon them. When I think upon my life, I pass over the interval between my father's death and my marriage with Mr Weston; for it was not living—it was barely existence."

"But when did you meet Mr Weston?"

"Oh! I can't make any romance for you out of that incident, Nelly," said her friend, laughing. "I met him, and he asked me to be his wife, and I consented, and that's the whole story, except that I have been very comfortable ever since, and led a peaceful and contented life. The fairy prince in whom I believed never came, as he never does come to nine out of ten of the romantic young hearts who expect him. And that is what I want to impress upon you: that, too often, in this world, we throw away the substance for the shadow, and are left desolate. Don't you be like me, and turn your back upon the best chance that may ever be offered you, until you are thankful in your middle age to become the wife of an old farmer, and rule over his pigs and poultry."

"But you are very happy, Mrs Weston," said the girl, as she gazed dreamily into the matron's face.

"Yes, I am! my dear," was the brisk reply, "and that is another proof of the folly of thinking that in order to be so a woman must first fall desperately in love with the man she marries. Do you think I fell in love with Mr Weston? Why, the first time I met him cheapening oats in the market-place at Redding-

ton, I thought him the queerest old figure I had ever seen. But I don't think so now, Nelly, and it would fare very badly with any one who dared to laugh at him in my presence. He is as good a husband as ever a woman had, and a great deal too good for me. And I wouldn't change him now, not for the fairy prince himself !”

Nelly rose from her position with a sigh. The story was ended—it was all very true, perhaps ; in fact, she had no doubt of it ; and yet, somehow, she felt sadly disappointed.

“ I have not said anything to vex you, Nelly, have I ? ” inquired Mrs Weston, rather anxiously.

“ Oh, no ! dear Mrs Weston, how should you ? I am sure that it is all very true, and very sensible ; only I wish that I could *feel* it as well as know it—everybody seems to think differently to myself. I suppose it is because I am so foolish.”

“ Not foolish, my dear girl, but thoughtless and ignorant of what will be for your own good. You see I was the same ; but what is the use of any of us suffering in this world, Nelly, if others are not to take warning by our mistakes ? I refused to listen to the counsel of my father and mother, and you have heard what came of it ; but though you have no parents you have your good guardian's advice to guide you, and your brother's welfare to think of, as well as your own, and it is not yet too late to consider both. So I trust I shall see you ‘ Mrs Monkton ’ yet,” continued Mrs Weston, laughing, “ or hear of it, if I don't see you, for you are very dear to me, my child.” And as she spoke she rose and placed her arms about Nelly's shoulders and kissed her cheek.

The girl turned round and hid her face upon the friendly bosom ready to receive her.

“ Dear Mrs Weston, I *will* think of it ! I will think over all that you and Mr Ray have said, and I will pray to be guided to do what is right and best, both for Bertie and myself. And now, let me go, please, without any more talking, for I would rather be alone. I would rather be quite by myself, whilst I try to make up my mind about this matter.”

CHAPTER XXX.

SUBDUED—NOT CONQUERED.

It was with a slow step and drooping figure that Nelly Brooke, after her conversation with Mrs Weston, returned to the solitude

of her own room. The candles had been lighted and placed on the table half an hour before, but no one had attended to them since, as was plainly evinced by their long wicks flaring in un-snuffed misery. But the girl seemed to notice neither the emptiness nor gloom of the apartment, as she sunk down on Bertie's vacated couch and buried her face in her hands. She was not more reconciled to the prospect before her than she had been two hours previously, but she no longer felt uncertain how the matter would end. Every one was against her : every one thought differently to what she did : and the experience of her past life taught her that she would not long be able to hold out against the wishes of her friends. In some respects she was strong ; but her strength was utter weakness when opposed to the advice or persuasion of those whom she loved. She was like a captured animal that watches the net by which it is surrounded draw closer and closer together, and knows that in another minute it will be hopelessly entangled in the meshes. And Nelly Brooke was not one of those wild impetuous women who will fight like a trapped tigress rather than yield to an untoward fate. She was far more like some timid brute that will dare to stand forth in defence of its home or young, and trembling with mortal fear the while, defiantly stamp its impotent hoof, or shake its harmless head, but which will passively endure any amount of personal molestation. She was brave and spirited when the rights of others were concerned, but she had resigned her own from the moment of her birth.

Her nature, in fact, though noble, was far too gentle and yielding to contend with the things of this rough world, where the more a person quietly receives from his fellow-creatures, the more will they force him to accept.

As she now sat pondering over Bertie's persuasions, Mr Ray's advice, and Mrs Weston's warnings, instead of ascribing selfish or worldly motives to them, she blamed herself for being so hard of heart and difficult of conviction, for since they were both hurt and astonished at her decision, it must be her judgment that was in fault, and not theirs.

She thought of Mrs Weston's story ; of the bame she encountered from her brothers and sisters, for having acted selfishly, and considered her own feelings before theirs : and of the many evils which followed her hasty step : and then, wondering if the day would come when Bertie would so reproach herself, she remembered with a shudder that it had already arrived ; and that

the question at issue had provoked more bitter words between them than perhaps had ever passed before. It was hard enough to bear now ; what would it be when Bertie was an old man, and she an old woman, and they still dragged out their lives in those dull rooms ; and no one more to her taste had appeared to renew the offer which Dr Monkton had made her ?

Would her brother refuse to forget that she had been selfish and obstinate then, or would he continue to reproach her, till life became unbearable, and she was glad to lay it down ? or would she even come herself to regret that she had been so quick to refuse all this world's goods, and to choose a life of dull poverty before one of affluence and pleasure ?

Nelly thought not, but she could not tell ! If it were only—if it were *only* for herself, it would not take a minute to decide ; but there was Bertie—her dear Bertie's good to think of ; and had not each of her advisers urged that as possessing the first claim upon her consideration.

She recalled how, when they were little children at play together, her grandfather had once cautioned her not to be too rough with her brother in these words : “ Remember, Nelly, that you have all the strength and Bertie has all the weakness, so you must be extra gentle with him on that account.” How often had she felt since then as if, though innocently, she had stolen half her twin brother's life, and was in a measure responsible for his deformity, and that when he saw her leap, or run, he must think the same himself. And she had made a silent vow, registered not once but a thousand times over, that as far as it lay in her power, she would devote her existence to repairing the deficiencies in his. And was the first sacrifice which she had been called upon to make for his sake, to prove too hard for her acceptance ?

“ Surely,” thought the poor child to herself, “ since every one says it is the right thing for me to do, God, who is all-powerful, can make me think the same, if I only ask Him.”

Thereupon she crept into her bedroom, and, falling on her knees in the dark, prayed for guidance and direction. But whilst she prayed, although she fully believed that she was addressing the Almighty with no desire but to learn His will concerning her, her thoughts were intermixed with what Mr Ray had said and Mrs Weston had said, and she was expecting every moment to see a miracle performed, and to find that her opinion had veered round to theirs. She was ready, like many of us, to do what Heaven willed, but she wanted to be made to like to do it at the

same time; and as such conformity is but the work of time, she remained at the close of her prayers as comfortless and undecided as before.

But suddenly a thought of her Cousin Nigel crossing her mind, roused her from her half despairing state. Not that it was an unusual occurrence for Nelly to think of him, and the days which she had spent at Orpington, but she had not yet done so in immediate reference to a contemplated marriage with Dr Monkton; though it could scarcely be with reference to marriage that a vision of the scene which she had had with her cousin in the corridor on the last night she had slept at the Chase now rose up before the eyes which were hidden in the bedclothes.

Yet, as it passed before her mental vision in all its minutiae, and her cheeks grew hot again in recalling the kiss which he had left upon her lips, the memory appeared to have some effect upon her wavering judgment, for she sprung to her feet as if she had been stung, and clasping her hands together, exclaimed with energy—

“I *can't* do it, indeed I can't do it! no, Bertie! not even for *you*.”

Her words, though full of decision, had been uttered beneath her breath, yet, had they been rung out upon the evening air, and received an instantaneous disclaimer, they could not have produced a more powerful effect than they seemed to do to Nelly, when they were answered by the sound of her brother's footstep.

Bertie's, of a surety; for whose else could it be, moving heavily about in the adjoining room; yet very unlike his usually cautious tread in its stumbling, noisy uncertainty. Nelly flew to the door which divided them, eager, notwithstanding the coldness of their parting, to express her pleasure at his return, and to offer him her assistance.

“Bertie!” she was about to ejaculate, “how is it that I never heard the wheels of your chair?” when she was struck dumb upon the threshold by the strangeness of his appearance.

With one of the flaming, unsnuffed candles in either hand; a face as white as chalk; and hair straying over his eyes, Robert Brooke turned at his sister's approach, and confronted her with a sickly leer. Nelly's heart nearly stopped beating with terror; she could not imagine what had happened to him; the only idea which struck her was that he had been suddenly taken ill.

“Bertie!” she gasped, “Bertie, what is the matter?”

Still he made no answer, but stood in the same position, sway-

ing backwards and forwards whilst the lights he held cast a green shade over his pallid countenance, and a weak foolish smile played about the corners of his mouth. She ran up to his side and took the candles from him, and shook him almost impatiently in her unknown fear.

"Speak to me, do speak to me. Are you ill? are you in pain? You terrify me, Bertie, with your looks."

Released from the candlesticks, and somewhat roused by the energy of her demand, her brother fell back into a chair and mumbled a few incoherent words.

Then Nelly did what she was very seldom guilty of. She lost her presence of mind. All that she had ever heard respecting the symptoms of impending paralysis or epilepsy, rushed upon it to increase its terror, and without another word she ran quickly through their own apartments into the Farm kitchen, on one side of the ample fireplace of which Aggie was privileged to keep her chair. There she found the old nurse as usual, dozing over her knitting and—since it was not quite time for the farming-men's supper—alone. The suddenness with which Nelly roused her was sufficient to send Aggie into a fit if no one else had one.

"Aggie! Aggie!" she exclaimed, violently shaking the woman's arm, "get up, Aggie—get up quick, Bertie is ill, he is dying."

Old people sleep lightly, and the nurse was wide-awake in a moment and trembling with the shock.

"Dying! lor! Miss Nelly—when—where? How did it happen? You've given me that start, I don't know how to stand."

"I know nothing, except that he is ill. Come with me, Aggie, come at once, I cannot stay here." And the next moment she was flying back along the whitewashed passage, with the old woman hobbling after her, and "blessing and saving" herself at every step.

But when, breathless with haste and fear, they reached the apartment of the man presumed to be dying, he did not appear to have become any worse during his sister's absence. On the contrary, he was sitting on the chair, just as she had left him, and with his eyes very open, and his legs very far apart, was apostrophising the candles, which Nelly had placed upon the chest of drawers, in a cheerful, not to say, jocular manner.

"Oh! is he going out of his mind?" cried Nelly, drawing back as she caught sight of him, and clinging to the arm of her nurse.

The old woman paused for a moment, and regarded him steadfastly: noted his rolling eyes, listless arms, and vacuous look;

and then, drawing a long breath as though she were greatly relieved, her own expression quickly changed from fear to one of contempt, and she limped up to the side of the chair, and grasped her master's shoulder firmly with her hand.

"Now then, Master Robert!" she said, angrily, "what is all this about? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir, to go frightening your sister after this fashion."

Nelly had watched the change in Aggie's face with the utmost curiosity and surprise; and when she saw her thus lay violent hands upon her suffering brother, she thought everybody was going mad together and flew to the rescue.

"Aggie! for shame! how dare you speak to him so? He is ill—he is in pain. I am sure he is. Oh! good heavens! what can I do for him?" and she threw her arms around Bertie's neck, and cushioned his head upon her warm heart, whilst his eyes rolled upwards to meet hers, and he babbled out some incoherent stuff which was intended to express his opinion of Aggie's conduct.

But the old nurse pushed her away.

"Come now, Miss Nelly, don't you do none of that until he deserves it. The best thing for you, my dear, is to go into the next room and bide there a bit, till I've put Master Robert into his bed.

"What! and leave him alone to you, when he is ill, and you speak so crossly to him; no, never, nurse."

"Ill! my dearie! he ain't no more ill than you are, take my word for it and ask no questions."

To this, Nelly was about to make an indignant rejoinder, when she raised her eyes and encountered those of the old woman. There was something in them which revealed the truth. Slowly but surely, beneath the shame of that discovery, the colour mounted into the poor girl's cheeks, until her whole face was one burning blush, and yet she would not utter a syllable that should betray that she was cognisant of Aggie's meaning. She only caught her breath once or twice as if she were choking, and pressed the heavy head which she still held closer to her faithful bosom. And then when she felt able to speak, she said very quietly—

"If Bertie is not ill, nurse, I can attend to him as well as you, and I would rather do so by myself. I am sorry that I disturbed you for nothing."

Old Aggie was immediately all penitence.

"Lor', my blessing, what's the good of me, if not to be disturbed according to your liking. But there, Miss Nelly, I won't

“speak another hard word to him, and that I promise you, if you’ll only let me stay a bit and help him into his bed. You’ll not be able to do it alone, my dear, and ’tisn’t fit as you should.”

So together, the women assisted Mr Robert Brooke into bed, where he soon sunk into a heavy slumber.

It was not likely that the news of his supposed illness could be kept entirely secret from the household, particularly as the boy who had pushed his Bath chair appeared at the Farm supper to relate how the “young master” had got out of the conveyance, and desired him to take it back to the house “better nor two hours” before he was said to have returned there himself.

Where he had spent the intervening time, no one knew, or had any likelihood of ascertaining.

But the occurrence had so alarmed Nelly, that she refused to retire to rest herself that night, but kept a weary watch (which Aggie in vain asked to be allowed to share) in her brother’s room, where she remained, hour after hour, wrapped in thought, as she reviewed, with idly clasped hands, the events and feelings of the past day.

Of what the poor child dreamed, as Bertie slept heavily on the bed beside which she crouched; whether she really persuaded herself that her judgment was the only one at fault; or whether a fearful and shameful future seemed to open before her with the bitter knowledge she had obtained that evening; a future which she might avert, or not averting might feel laid at her door, was best known to herself, for she revealed the truth to no one.

Only when the day dawned, and her brother—roused from his slumbers—found that she had been watching the livelong night beside his pillow, he was so filled with shame and contrition, and self-reproach, that the real love which united the twin children, poured forth in an unchecked stream, and they revelled in a burst of mutual confidence, in which, though plentifully mingled, the sweet so predominated over the bitter, that it was felt, on Nelly’s side at least, that life was too short and empty of such joy to permit of anything which was preventable interrupting it again.

When old Aggie had the opportunity to observe her nursing on the following day, she was surprised at the calmness which her features had assumed, and concluded, in consequence, that she must have failed to understand her hints respecting the cause of her brother’s mysterious illness.

“And I’ll bite out my tongue before I’ll be the one to tell her

the truth," was the nurse's mental ejaculation, "though it be easy enough to deceive her, bless her innocence. But if it go on at this rate, a blind man will be able to see it for himself before long, so I needn't trouble my old head about the matter;" and then, addressing the object of her thoughts, "Well, Miss Nelly, my dearie, and where may you be going so early?"

"Only to the post-office to post a letter for Bertie, nurse," replied the girl with a plaintive smile, which ended in a plaintive sigh. "He was up the first thing this morning to write it, and is very anxious that it should go to-day. He is asleep again now, so I think you had better not go in for fear of disturbing him, for he is rather feverish, and rest will do him good."

"And how may his head be by this time, Miss Nelly?" the old servant could not resist inquiring, as she glanced mischievously up into her young mistress's face.

The cheeks grew crimson again, and the soft eyes sought the ground, but the voice in which Nelly answered, though subdued, was womanly in its dignity.

"It is very painful, nurse, as you may guess; but I don't suppose that talking about it will do it any good. The best thing to be done now, I think, is to keep Bertie quiet; and ourselves too."

From the way in which Nelly uttered the last words, Aggie perceived her mistake in deciding that she had been less mindful of the truth than herself, and laying her wrinkled hand upon the girl's arm, she hastened, in an indirect manner, to apologise for her insinuation.

"Don't you be vexed with me, my dear! I didn't mean nothing, you may be sure, and if I'd thought that things had made themselves as plain to you as they have to me, I wouldn't have mentioned nothing, neither. But all I say is," continued the old woman, with a happy disregard of her first assertion that she had meant nothing—"all I say is, that if that fine doctor friend of Master Robert's can't do him more good than this, why he'd better stay away from Bickton, and that's the truth, for he's making matters worse for us instead of better."

At this contemptuous mention of the "fine doctor friend," the ready flush again mounted to Nelly's face.

"It's not Dr Monkton's fault, nurse," she answered, quickly; "no one can say but that he has done all that is possible to improve dear Bertie's health and add to his comfort."

"Well, but it don't add to ours, Miss Nelly, for him to come here

putting fine ideas in the poor lad's head, which won't never come to pass, and only render him ill-contented with his home. The doctor's at the bottom of this, you may rest assured. I never liked him overmuch from the first time"——

"Hush, hush, nurse," said the girl, laying her hand over the woman's mouth, whilst the colour flew from her face as rapidly as it had appeared there. "You mustn't say a word against Dr Monkton, or any of his doings, because—because"——

"Because what, my dearie?" inquired Aggie, unsuspiciously, as Nelly removed her hand from her lips to press it over her own heart.

"Because,—stop a minute, nurse, and I'll tell you, because I'm going to—to marry him."

The murder was out, and the girl and her nurse, the one trembling from the agitation of telling the news, the other from that of hearing it, stood for a few moments gazing steadily in each others' faces.

At last Nelly said in a very low voice—

"And don't you wish me—joy—Aggie!"

"Joy, my dear bairn, I wish you every blessing that the Lord can shower over you, both here and hereafter," exclaimed the old woman, whilst the drops ran down her furrowed cheeks; and holding out her arms, Aggie took her "child" into her embrace, just as she had been used to do in the days of old; and the nurse and nursing mingled their tears together.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CATHEDRAL TOWN OF HILSTONE.

HILSTONE was one of those somnolent places (not singular amongst the county towns of foggy and respectable England, which, going to sleep six days in the week, wake up on the seventh, namely, their market-day, to make an extraordinary fuss over the most trivial topics and events of a commonplace existence.

But, added to being a market town, Hilstone could boast of a cathedral! and the cathedral towns of our native country possess an individuality exclusively their own, for which all those who do not dwell therein may be thankful.

Why, in order that a collection of bricks and mortar may

attain the height of respectability, it must be endued with the extreme of dulness, no one has yet been able to determine, but the fact remains, and Hilstone was no exception to the general rule. In vain had a charitable government, in pity for its stagnant condition, established a military depôt on the outskirts of the town. The proximity of the red coats had produced no better effect than to put the ecclesiastical party considerably out of temper, and to cause the magic upspringing of half a dozen new public houses, to meet the increased demand for liquor.

"Sword and Gown" would not fraternise, and only maintained the peace on protest, whilst at every turn they interfered with each others' amusements, and if by chance they agreed to mingle and try to enjoy themselves together, the influence of the cathedral, like an austere matron clothed in black, with a rod of iron in her hand, kept guard over them, and put an effectual stop to anything like frivolity.

If the 40th Bays (which was the regiment then stationed at Hilstone) got up a dance or a pic-nic, or anything to promote a little gaiety, the clerical party thought it altogether beneath their dignity to attend it, whilst their subordinates sued the military to purchase tickets for amateur oratorios and charitable bazaars, with the same want of success.

Yet, strange to say, the feud was not between the men of each profession, for although their avocations led them into widely different paths, they could manage to meet without clashing. Neither did the ladies of the cathedral systematically frown upon the owners of the moustaches,—as how should they do, when Captain Herbert Filmer, own grandchild to the Dean of Hilstone, and the son of Mrs Filmer, who lived at the deanery, and "led" the town, not only honoured the 40th Bays by belonging to it, but was as often to be met in his mother's drawing-room as in the mess-room of his regiment. Indeed, nothing pleased Mrs Filmer better than to see the deanery table or concert-room filled with officers, and she was always especially gracious to the young, unmarried, rich colonel of the Bays, and was known to look with a very lenient eye upon his undisguised flirtation with her only daughter.

But it was the regimental ladies to whom Mrs Filmer and all her satellites bore so unmitigated an aversion ; that it was only on one or two of those whose husbands were highest in the service that they had even left their cards. They were the obstacle which would ever prevent the black and scarlet from mingling as freely

as they should have done ; for although a few of the bachelors of the corps ignored the party spirit which divided them, the husbands of the slighted women were compelled to take up arms in their defence, and to refuse to partake of any gaiety in which they were not included, or were likely to be brought in contact with those who had affronted them. It is hard to say why this female feud existed, or when it had begun ; but the ladies of the Bays had been heard to affirm that the occurrence was by no means an unusual one in military experience, and that they would rather be stationed anywhere than near a cathedral town.

Perhaps they dressed a little too smartly and fashionably to suit the quiet ideas of Hilstone, or perhaps they had been indiscreet in averring their distaste to the place and its inhabitants, and in comparing its dulness with the remembrance of former gaieties.

For although the dulness of Hilstone was an indisputable fact, the natives refused to believe in it, and nothing offended them more than that a stranger should dare to express an opinion in the matter.

To them, the old town was a paradise ; they revered its shops, its institutions, and its society ; it was the healthiest place in the world, the most scientific and the most popular. Nothing that happened in Hilstone could be wrong.

They lifted up their hands at the bare idea of its sharp, cold climate disagreeing with any person, whatever his complaint ; were incredulous on the possibility of procuring articles better or cheaper elsewhere, and if any one moved from Hilstone who was not absolutely compelled by his evil fortune to do so, they simply considered that he must be insane. How far they were justified in their opinion, perhaps no one could judge who had not lived there. For on a first inspection, Hilstone did certainly appear to be a very charming old place. It possessed some great advantages, and might have possessed more had its townsmen been less arrantly conceited with respect to it and themselves. It is not unusual, in this world, to see a person with good natural abilities stop short on the road to success, because he has not sufficient discrimination to distinguish encouragement from admiration, and fancies he has arrived at the end of his task before he has mastered the beginning. So it was with Hilstone, or rather with its inhabitants. They rested its claims to notice upon the fame which it had acquired in by-gone days, and were content to let them rest there. Was it not one of the most ancient towns in England ? were not kings and queens buried in gilded coffins in the cathedral ? and did

it not possess some of the finest antiquities in the country? What could people want more? This was all very true, and had modern attractions been added to its ancient interest, Hilstone might have been transformed into something more like the earthly paradise which its faithful natives believed it to be. But the ordinary soul of the nineteenth century is corrupt, and cannot be content to derive all its pleasures from contemplating the dry bones of Saxon kings, or stone effigies with their noses ground off; nor rest satisfied with the excitement attendant upon the examination of curious monuments and buildings, because they were erected some hundred years before. And the error of the Hilstone people lay in the belief that nothing more was necessary to render the place a pleasant habitation, and the idea of any innovation, however slight, was put down with zeal worthy of a more deserving object.

Was it proposed by some enterprising member of the Town Council to build a public concert room? What could they want better than the Mechanics' Institute, in which the concerts of the Choral Society had been held for so many years? To widen the principal street, and erect new shops! Would they destroy the appearance of a thoroughfare which had stood in its present condition for hundreds of years? To inclose a public field and turn it into a subscription cricket ground! What, deprive the national school children of their right of way, even though it were as easy for them to go by the road, and the proposal was made for the benefit of the town? Never! the whole place would rise at the mere attempt; and, indeed, on the last occasion the "place," represented by all its worst characters, did rise and threaten to burn down the house of the person who had been so unfortunate as to think of the plan. Hilstone wanted more shops, more gas, more laying on of water, and more carrying off of drains; but the Hilstonians were perfectly contented to let things remain as they were; they liked being cheated, and walking home in the dark, and having a fever break out periodically in the back slums of the town, and refused to believe that any of these evils required remedy.

The members of their Town Council and Board of Works, being invariably also members of their own families, they always got their own way with them, and the tradesmen ruled the place and did with it as they chose. For it was a remarkable fact about Hilstone that all the so-called gentry bore the same names as the shopkeepers, although they steadily ignored any relationship between them. Thus, the five Misses Harley, daughters of old

Harley the retired solicitor, who occupied one of the best houses in the town, quite tittered at the absurdity of their papa signing the same name as Harley the pork-butcher, although the pork-butcher's girls bore a striking resemblance to themselves. And the same peculiarity being traceable through several other families, the shopkeepers of Hilstone gave themselves great airs, and charged double the price they should have done for their goods on the score of their grand relations. The ladies of the 40th Bays had tried all the shops in Hilstone, and come to the conclusion that it would be more economical to send for what they wanted to London; which decision being rumoured about had given great offence to the townspeople: "Not good enough for them, I suppose," had been the general remark, delivered with much acerbity and elevated noses.

It was said that the military ladies upon arrival had visited the cathedral, inspected the crypts, read the inscriptions on the tombs, tipped the verger, and then turned away to inquire who was considered the best milliner in Hilstone, and when the next ball was expected to take place? expressing general dissatisfaction on being told that it was seldom thought worth while to get up a public ball there, as it would be sure not to be patronised by the cathedral party. They had attended the cathedral service every Sunday afternoon since, but openly confessed they did so for the sake of the anthem, for they greatly preferred hearing their own chaplain read and preach; a piece of heresy which, being quickly repeated into the ear of the dean's daughter-in-law, caused her to "sniff" palpably whenever the military ladies passed her pew, and to make whispered comments on their appearance to her daughter, or any female toady who might be in waiting on the occasion. For Mrs Filmer was surrounded by toadies, ever ready to run messages for her, or to retail gossip; she considered herself the principal person in Hilstone, and as far as the cloisters were concerned, perhaps she was so. She was the widow of the dean's eldest son, and with her daughter Laura, had lived at the deanery ever since her husband's death; not only lived but ruled, making as free use of her father-in-law's purse as of his house. Some people might have considered this rather a dependent position in which to be placed; but no Hilstonian presumed to link the ugly word "dependence" with the sacred name of Filmer. The reverence due to the dean reflected itself on his daughter-in-law, and had she been his wife, she could not have met with greater respect and honour, a homage which in her own person

she was by no means entitled to, for, stripped of her temporary importance as mistress of the Deanery, Mrs Filmore was simply a coarse-minded, ill-bred, and ill-tempered woman. The cathedral of Hilstone was so situated in the centre, or rather to the back of the town, that nothing but its spire was to be seen from the High Street. It was surrounded by the lowest and poorest habitations of the place, which clustered about it like rabble thronging a monarch; and the occupants of which defiled the iron railings guarding the graveyard by hanging out wet garments upon them to dry, and permitted the sanctity of the cloisters to be outraged by the noisy shouts of children at play. Moreover, the cathedral yard was a thoroughfare, and passengers might be seen traversing it at any hour of the day, from the butcher boy with his tray and the nursemaid with her perambulator, down to the itinerant organ-grinder with his detestable instrument. The cathedral itself was approached on every side by heavy archways, forming the termination to high walls, and was not to be seen until the last of them had been traversed and the visitor was stepping beneath the lime avenue which led up to its massive door. It was in one of the narrow well-guarded streets leading to the cloister that Dr Monkton's house was situated, causing Nelly Brooke to think it looked like a prison, and that it must be difficult to breathe there.

The Deanery adjoined the cathedral, and seemed almost like a continuation of it, whilst the other large houses in the cloisters, eight or ten in number, though close at hand, were disposed here and there in that fanciful bo-peep fashion in which the architects of older days loved to place their buildings, and all bore a certain similarity in being very large, draughty, and damp, and covered with ivy, which rendered the low-pitched rooms still darker than they need have been. These houses were not all occupied by people attached to the cathedral, for the next in size to the Deanery was rented by the Honourable Mrs Allondale, whose three daughters, although far less attractive, and more "fast" and flirting than any lady in the 40th Bays, had been pronounced to be "dear girls" by Mrs Filmer, and were recognised accordingly by the Hilstone public as models of fashion and propriety.

Everybody connected with the cloister was sacred in the eyes of Hilstone, even down to the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons who lived in a set of alms-houses within the sacred precincts, built after the same pattern, and not much better than those provided for the poor. But there were three especial

planets round which the lower satellites revolved, and from whom they derived half their effulgence. The first of these was, of course, Mrs Filmer; the second was Dr Nesbitt, the cathedral organist; the third was Mr Rumbell, a bachelor canon with a bass voice, which all the spinsters declared to be marvellous in its perfection, and who was president of the Choral Society of Hilstone.

Of the character of Mrs Filmer sufficient has already been said to account for any future actions of which she may be guilty. That of Dr Nesbitt was a far deeper one, though, in its way, scarcely less unpleasant. He was a man of powerful intellect and great musical ability, but with an uncertain and violent temper, and a reserved disposition which forbid his opening his heart to any one. He was very much courted and deferred to in Hilstone, but everybody was more or less afraid of him. On his part he treated the towns-people with politeness because it was his good-will and pleasure to retain his appointment as organist amongst them; but there was ever a cynical look to be discerned lurking behind his readiest smile, and in his heart he hated and despised them all. The town called itself a musical one; it had placed itself under the direction of one or two favourite canons, and half-a-dozen choristers, and considered the Hilstone Choral Society, and the Hilstone Glee and Madrigal Union, to be two of the best organised and conducted amateur institutions of the kind.

Dr Nesbitt had been asked to accept the conduct of one or both of these societies, but had steadily declined to have anything to do with them. He carried on a secret feud against all the musical canons, but especially against Mr Rumbell with his bass voice, and Mr Pratt with his tenor voice, who had both attempted to interfere with the instruction of the cathedral choir. Dr Nesbitt would laugh in his sleeve at the mere notion of either of these men knowing anything of music; a first-rate musician himself, and with the capability of making the splendid organ under his charge sound in such a manner that all England would have been glad to crowd to hear him, he would yet on occasions mount the loft stairs in so bad a humour, that neither choristers nor canons could by any possibility follow the chords struck by his wayward fingers. And then Dr Nesbitt would be delighted at the public failure, and before he had given the cathedral authorities time to reprimand him, would lull their anger by such exquisite music as is seldom heard upon this lower earth.

He knew too well that, however Mr Rumbell might puff with indignation, or Mr Pratt weep with chagrin, all Hilstone would vote against his dismissal. His fame was too wide-spread for such a step to injure anybody but themselves ; he would at once be gladly seized upon and engaged by some rival cathedral town, and they would have lost the glory of being able to boast that they had not only the finest organ, but the best organist in England.

And so Dr Nesbitt played just as he liked ; and even Mrs Filmer reserved her most gracious smiles for the occasions when she asked him to take part in the private concerts at the Deanery ; and the Honourable Mrs Allondale, and the Misses Harley (who, although not at all honourable, were very rich), thought, when they had managed to secure the attendance of Dr Nesbitt at their musical parties, that there was no one else in the room worth entertaining. And yet Mr Rumbell enjoyed almost an equal share of attention for he possessed the extra advantage of being a bachelor, which Dr Nesbitt was not, having an invalid wife who never went into society, stowed away somewhere in the recesses of his dark, damp house. Mr Rumbell was fancy-free, and being president of the Choral Society, which met once a week for practice, and to which every single lady in Hilstone belonged, he had great opportunities of becoming known to the female members of his congregation.

He was fat, it is true, and pale and puffy, and his figure looked more like a pincushion stuffed with bran than a muscular living body ; but still he was a canon, and single ; and had a voice with such splendid low notes in it that the ladies of Hilstone declared that it almost made them cry. Dr Nesbitt, on the contrary, affirmed that he could not hear the canon sing without laughing ; but as he always played his accompaniments when asked to do so, with the utmost gravity, the Hilstone virgins could not guess that he held such heterodox sentiments regarding their favourite, and it was only to a chosen few that he had revealed them. Such were the luminaries round which the Hilstone satellites revolved, adoring ; such the society to which Nelly Brooke, as Dr Monkton's wife, would be introduced.

The doctor was a great favourite with the cathedral party, and consequently with all the town ; and although the news of his contemplated marriage had cast a gloom upon the unmarried portion of his female patients, Mrs Filmer (having higher views for her own daughter) saw nothing objectionable in the idea, and

therefore his sister, Mrs Prowse, tried to put a good face on the matter, and make the best of it.

For Mrs Prowse, who had hitherto resided with her brother, was the wife of one of the oldest canons in Hilstone, and went hand-in-glove with Mrs Filmer in all her likes and dislikes, however unreasonable they might be ; acted chief jackal, in fact, to the cathedral lioness, and was therefore thoroughly opposed to the ladies of the 40th Bays, and, generally speaking, to most newcomers. It was mainly through her influence that her brother had obtained the principal practice of the town, for she was older than himself, and had lived in it many years before he thought of settling there ; though, fortunately for him, soon after his arrival, the medical practitioner then most in favour, having been foolish enough to risk his popularity by helping the surgeon of the regiment then occupying the barracks to pull an officer's wife through a difficult case of fever, and found himself banished from several houses in consequence, James Monkton had nimbly stepped into the vacated position, and taken good care to maintain it since.

Mrs Filmer had been one of those who most strongly condemned old Dr Nash's misplaced philanthropy, and her patronage of the new candidate for Hilstone favour had established his fortune at once. Mrs Prowse, although she had never seen Nelly Brooke, and was not acquainted with the people of the Chase, considered that with such advantages, her brother should have looked higher for a wife ; but Mrs Filmer, only anticipating another addition to her list of worshippers, elected to pooh-pooh the fears and doubts of her jackal, and to assert that Dr Monkton was in a position to marry whom he chose.

And so, pending the appearance of my heroine, the matter rested.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS FILMER'S JACKAL.

It was market-day at Hilstone—a bright, glorious Thursday in August—and the High Street had wakened up, and looked quite gay. Mr Jenkins, the principal linen-draper, had dressed his windows with gold and silver-spotted tarlatanes, surmounted by gorgeous wreaths and chalky white kid gloves ; for though there were few respectable public balls held in Hilstone, the trades-

people occasionally indulged in capers by themselves, and there was no saying what attraction the flimsy materials might not have for the many young ladies who came in from the surrounding country to adorn the town on market-day, and who were much in the habit of congregating round Mr Jenkins's shop, in consequence of which well-known custom a knowing seller of ginger-bread and sweet stuff had pitched his tent just outside the linen-draper's door.

This pitching of booths in the public road, as if for a fair, appeared to be a legal institution in Hilstone, for no less than six or eight blocked up the High Street alone.

Near the entrance to the grain market, itinerant vendors were selling leather gloves and gaiters, and canes and driving-whips, and vociferously pressing their wares on the stout, red-faced farmers who passed continually in and out of the building, conferring together on the price of oats and barley, and enforcing their arguments by two fat, outstretched fingers, laid cunningly across each other.

In the stable-yards of the two principal inns, ostlers were every minute being shouted for, to take the horse of some new arrival, whilst the savoury fumes of hot soups and pasties, which proceeded from the open doors of each establishment, proved that good entertainment was preparing for man as well as beast.

The confectioners, attempting to outwit the innkeepers, had decked their windows with the most tempting hams and tongues, and delicate French rolls, and the masters of such shops as could not hope for any increase to their business on account of its being market-day, stood on their thresholds deliciously idle, but beaming with smiles, as though they drove so thriving a trade during the rest of the week, that it was rather a comfort than otherwise to have nothing to do.

The sun shone powerfully, and everybody looked happy and gay.

The ladies of Hilstone, although they complained greatly of the "awkwardness of being looked at," and the "inconvenience of being elbowed," always turned out in large numbers on Thursday mornings; and there they were as usual on this particular occasion, sauntering up and down the High Street, stopping every now and then to examine some novelty in a shop-window; or rushing together in a terrified group, as a drove of dusty bullocks or unruly cart colts came lumbering down the hill on their way to the cattle market. Conspicuous among them, more

on account of her sharp voice and decided manner, than of her imposing appearance, was Dr Monkton's sister, Mrs Prowse, and walking with her was Miss Fanny Clewson, the daughter of one of the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons, who occupied the alms-houses in the cloisters.

Mrs Prowse was a small woman, not so short as extremely narrow, and for her sex ill-shaped. Captain Herbert Filmer had emphatically described her as "two planks lashed together," and there was not much more to be said for her figure. The style of her face was prim and old-maidish; few strangers would have taken her for a wife, none for a mother; and in this last conjecture they would have been right, for Mrs Prowse was a childless and a child-hating woman.

Her eyes were large and dark, like her brother's, but they never wore the soft expression which his, at times, assumed; her nose was a small aquiline, and her mouth was hard and inflexible, with straight, thin lips, and over-sized teeth.

Whenever Mrs Prowse made a remark there always seemed to be something more behind.

She would deliver her opinion, and apparently without reserve; but then the thin lips would resolutely close over the large teeth, whilst a look remained in the eyes which was intended to indicate that she knew more on the subject than she chose to divulge.

No one really liked Mrs Prowse; even her brother, although he permitted himself to be much influenced by her, was rejoicing in the prospect of getting her out of his house, whilst her poor husband would have been only too thankful could he have entertained any reasonable hope of the same contingency.

Mrs Filmer chose to make use of her; and, therefore, all Mrs Filmer's cronies and toadies were compelled to accept her snappish remarks with as good a grace as they could muster, but it was only on sufferance that she maintained a circle of friends in Hilstone. Herbert and Laura Filmer were rude to her openly; most people abused her behind her back; even Fanny Clewson, who was a very snake for subtlety, could not always resist showing what she thought of Mrs Prowse's insinuations. Miss Fanny Clewson was of the pussy-cat order of women, soft and velvety in the extreme to all outward appearance, but possessing very sharp claws, which she could unsheathe when she thought fit.

She had been a pretty girl, and was still a pretty woman, but although evidently not young, no one knew her real age. It might have been anything from five and twenty to five and

thirty, but being unmarried, she still passed in Hilstone as a girl.

She had large, sleepy, bashful-looking eyes, which were generally cast upon the ground, but which could, on occasions (particularly such occasions as encountering a gentleman), glance upwards through their long lashes with the slyest look imaginable. Besides these attractions, she possessed a small, straight nose, a pursed-up rose-bud mouth, a bright complexion, and a profusion of silky hair, which she wore in long, soft bands on either side of her face, like a spaniel's ears; and when it is added that her voice (at least the voice she kept for the public) was low and sweet, and most oily in its tone, Miss Clewson's portrait is completed. She had lived alone with her mother in the almshouses before mentioned, for any number of years, and was one of the standing dishes of Hilstone. Of course she was, or professed to be, strictly ecclesiastical in all her tastes, and totally opposed to such frivolities as bands, and balls, and uniforms; nevertheless, it had been whispered, by some of rumour's hundred tongues, that more than one imprudent subaltern had got into a scrape through Miss Fanny's bashful eyes, and only been able to wrest his *billets-doux* from the knowing clutches of old Mrs Clewson, in consideration of a *quid pro quo*.

However, whether in this instance rumour spoke truth or falsehood, it is certain that such knowledge could never have reached the ears of Mrs Filmer or her jackal, or Miss Fanny Clewson would assuredly not have been permitted to walk up the High Street by the side of a canon's wife. Yet here they were, proceeding leisurely together, and talking alternately of Dr Monkton's marriage, which had taken place some weeks previously, and Mrs Prowse's new house.

"I wonder you didn't go to the wedding," said Miss Fanny, twisting herself round so as to face her friend. (Miss Clewson never walked arm-in-arm with any one; it prevented her moving her body about in those snake-like evolutions with which she loved to wriggle up the High Street.) "A wedding in the country is generally such a charming sight."

"I can't say I agree with you," replied Mrs Prowse, in her peculiar voice, the tones of which, although not loud, were yet all treble, and never fell at the conclusion of a sentence. "I think all weddings are dreary affairs, and this one must have been especially so, because the young lady's grandfather has not been dead a year yet; and my brother tells me that it was a stipulation

that the marriage should be strictly private. So I was not likely to trouble myself to go all that distance for nothing."

"Has Miss Brooke no parents then?" inquired Miss Clewson.

"No, she is an orphan. Her only near relation is her twin brother."

"A brother, oh dear!" exclaimed Fanny Clewson, as a vision rose up before her of six feet of manly beauty, furnished with moustaches. "Then I suppose we shall see the gentleman down at Hilstone also."

"Scarcely likely, I should think," was the disheartening response, "for he is a great invalid, and has never moved out of his native village. He could find no enjoyment in the bustle of a town."

"Then he has property of his own?"

"Oh, yes, he is quite independent; he has a country place or something of the sort in Kent, which of course he will continue to reside on."

By this it will be seen that Mrs Prowse was not very enlightened on the subject of Nelly and Robert Brooke; indeed, her greatest private grievance was, that her brother had been so reticent with her regarding his new connexions; but she was too cunning to confess this openly. It sounded well to speak of a "country place," and as if the newly-made Mrs Monkton had money; and Fanny Clewson was too great a gossip not to repeat all she heard.

"Are not those rich people who are renting Orpington Chase some relations to Mrs Monkton?" again asked the latter, who was anxious to worm out all the information she could respecting the doctor's bride.

"I believe they are; distant cousins, or something of the sort; at least James first met Miss Brooke at their house; but he has no communication at the Chase now. Mrs Brooke was rude to him, and he very rightly refused to visit her again. James stands a great deal too high to put up with nonsense from any one."

"Of course," was the sympathetic rejoinder; "but, dear me, then Mrs Monkton and her cousins won't be able to associate together; that will be a pity, won't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I suppose Mrs Monkton will choose to think the same as my brother does on the matter. From his description she is quite a child, and will of course be guided in all things by his wishes. I daresay they will be more like father and daughter together, than husband and wife."

"Father and daughter, he, he, he," tittered Miss Clewson. "She must be very young indeed, if Dr Monkton is old enough to be her father."

"How foolish you are, Fanny Clewson," was the snappish reply; "it's not likely I was alluding to their respective ages. I mean that my brother is too clever, and has too much knowledge of the world to permit any woman to take the rule over him."

"And they are really to be home to-day! Is she very pretty, Mrs Prowse? Do tell me all about her. How anxious you must be to see her. It will be so charming for you to have a sister."

"I'm not at all anxious to see her," replied the canon's wife, who prided herself on always saying exactly what she meant; "I'm not like some people, who are afraid to say what they think. I don't see what difference her coming will make to Hilstone; but that is James's concern and not mine."

"But you have made your own house so comfortable, and have arranged everything in it so tastefully, that I am sure it must be a pleasure only to look at it. I was saying to Miss Harley only yesterday, that yours will be the most elegant house in Hilstone, and you will make us all jealous, though I am sure no one has a better right to be surrounded by every elegance than you have."

"There is not much difficulty in choosing a few tables and chairs, if one were only permitted"——

"Ah, not to *you*, perhaps, who have such exquisite taste," interposed Miss Clewson.

"I wish to goodness you'd break yourself of that habit of interrupting people," said Mrs Prowse, sharply; "it's shocking bad taste, particularly in a girl. I was going to observe, that if Mr Prowse would only allow one to—— Who's that coming towards us now?"

"Mrs Roe, dear Mrs Prowse, and Miss Hammond," replied Fanny Clewson, eager to atone for her error; and the next minute the four ladies had met and greeted one another, and formed a cluster on the pavement which ejected the passing passengers into the road.

Miss Hammond was a very skinny old maid with a yellow face and an undeniable wig; Mrs Roe was a married lady, verging on middle age, with a pair of spectacles placed across her prominent nose, and a huge roll of music beneath her arm; and both ladies talked very fast and very animatedly, as though they were a couple of frolicsome girls who had no business to be taking a walk on their own account.

"Well, dear ! and how are you after your fatigues of yesterday evening, and how did you manage to get home at last?"

The speaker was Mrs Roe, and she addressed Mrs Prowse—her query alluding to the meeting of the choral society which always took place on a Wednesday evening ; and at the termination of the last one of which, Mr Prowse had proved delinquent, and not appeared to convey his spouse home again.

"Oh ! I did very well, thank you," replied the neglected wife. "Mr Rumbell would not permit me to wait for Mr Prowse, but took me home himself."

"Oh ! he did—did he—you naughty thing?" exclaimed Miss Hammond, archly, as she playfully tapped Mrs Prowse with her parasol. "Well ! I shall take care to tell the canon next time I meet him that he had better come next Wednesday, and look after his wife himself. But what did you think of the practice ? Did not the soprani go well together ? and was not Mr Pratt's solo lovely ? You came in finely, too, with your recitative, and quite took the room by storm."

Mrs Prowse had a voice something like that of a singing mouse ; but in consideration of the favour in which she stood with Mrs Filmer, the president of the society gave her a solo part whenever it was possible.

"Now, do hold your tongue, Susy," interposed Mrs Roe. "I have something of importance to tell Mrs Prowse. What do you think, dear ? I am afraid our good president wants a little talking to from you. Mrs Clarence has been granted a member's ticket."

Now Mrs Clarence was the wife of Captain Clarence of the 40th Bays ; a very nice-looking woman of five and twenty, with a splendid soprano voice ; and although the choral society was a public one, its members had as yet been strictly confined to the cathedral party.

"Never !" exclaimed the other ladies in a breath.

"It is true, I assure you. Wright told me so himself. She was at his shop this morning with a written order from Mr Rumbell for a soprano's ticket ; so of course he sold it her. But what can Mr Rumbell have been thinking of ?"

"But it is impossible ! it must be a mistake," exclaimed Mrs Prowse, with excitement ; "the list is closed, and has been for two months past. Did not Mr Rumbell give it out publicly ?"

"Of course, he did. I remember it perfectly, and Miss Green wished so much to enter afterwards, that she cried when she found she was too late to obtain a ticket. Oh ! there's something

behind this, you may depend upon it. It should be looked into."

"It *shall* be looked into," replied Mrs Prowse, energetically. "Mrs Clarence must have been up to some of her nasty military tricks—I hate such chicanery—and, by the way, here comes Mr Rumbell himself, so I'll just put the question to him at once."

The ladies stood a little to one side to make way for the burly canon, although they had no intention that he should pass them, nor had he apparently any wish to do so. Mr Rumbell was in a cheery mood, consonant with the weather, but that he usually was with his female acquaintances, on week-days. He stopped short on perceiving them, shook hands heartily with Mrs Prowse, Mrs Roe, and Miss Hammond, and would have done the same by Fanny Clewson, had not her blushing bashfulness prompted her to draw a step backwards, from which position she timidly proffered a set of trembling fingers.

"Well! ladies—how are you?" he exclaimed, not noticing that the usually beaming looks of Mrs Prowse were overcast. "You do not seem to have suffered from your exertion of last night. A capital practice, was it not? If we had a little more strength in the soprani we should do. Have you heard from your brother, Mrs Prowse? When is he expected to return? Hilstone misses him sadly."

"Dr and Mrs Monkton will be home, I believe, by this evening, Mr Rumbell," was the measured reply.

"Indeed! So soon—that's better than I thought. And so, I suppose you and Prowse have cleared out, bag and baggage. How do you like the change?"

"We are quite satisfied, I thank you, with our new abode."

Mrs Prowse uttered these words so stiffly, that Mr Rumbell began to suspect that his presence was not indispensable.

"Well! I mustn't detain you this beautiful morning. I am glad to hear we are to have Monkton back so soon. Good-day, ladies." And raising his hat he essayed to move on.

"Stay, Mr Rumbell!" exclaimed Mrs Prowse, suddenly regaining her animation. "I wish to ask you a question before you go. Is it true that Captain Clarence's wife is to become a member of our choral society?"

The tone and the look were unmistakable, and the unfortunate canon at once perceived the reason of his cold reception.

"Well! I believe so," he half stammered in his confusion; "at

least, Mrs Clarence asked me for an order some little while back. Has it been presented?"

"The order was dated last week!" remarked Mrs Roe, maliciously.

"And the list was closed two months ago," continued Mrs Prowse. "Miss Green could not obtain a ticket, although she works exclusively for the cathedral ladies; and that outsiders should be admitted when our own people are excluded seems very strange."

"Miss Green, if you mean the dressmaker," replied Mr Rumbell, "has no voice, Mrs Prowse, as you must allow, and has had no instruction, and one of our first rules is that no one shall become a member who has not some knowledge of music. The room is small enough already, and we must not fill it with useless voices. I have closed the list, as you say, to all ordinary candidates, but we can't afford to turn away a Jenny Lind or a Grisi, you know, should they make an application for admittance."

"And you mean to insinuate that Mrs Clarence is a Jenny Lind, then!" wrathfully returned Mrs Prowse.

"I mean to say that she possesses a very beautiful voice," replied Mr Rumbell, who could hold his own when he chose, and had to do so occasionally, amongst the Hilstone females, "and that I did not grant her the order for the ticket until I had consulted the vice-president and others; but we were all unanimous on the propriety of admitting her as a member."

"Oh! of course, if you're all agreed, it must be right," said Mrs Prowse, tossing her head, "but I think the other members of the society will require some explanation on the subject."

"Which I shall be most willing to afford them," was the canon's reply, as he again bowed and passed on.

"Now, what can be the meaning of that?" exclaimed Mrs Roe, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"I can see the meaning of it, well enough," replied Mrs Prowse, indignantly; "I heard last week, that he had been dining more than once at the Clarendons'. It's just like those military women, they don't care what they do or say in order to attain an object. But don't let us talk of it any more. There's Dr Nesbitt; I dare say, if the truth were known, he was one of Mr Rumbell's advisers, for he is always dining up at the barracks, and I wonder dear Mrs Filmer allows it—but she is so lenient and good-natured.

The cathedral organist came shuffling down the street as she spoke, and passed through their midst, with his eyes abstractedly

fixed upon the ground. The ladies all bowed to him—some spoke ; and the simultaneous greeting arresting his attention, he raised his head, started, and then, without removing his hat, gave them a rough nod, and shambled on.

"Dear Dr Nesbitt is so absent!" murmured Miss Clewson, plaintively.

"Thinking of Mrs Clarence, perhaps," suggested spiteful Mrs Prowse.

"Well, Susy ! we must be trotting on," said Mrs Roe, beginning to tire of standing still. This was the signal for breaking up the party. The friends separated, and Mrs Prowse and Fanny Clewson were about to resume their promenade, when the younger lady observed—

"Dear me ! here comes Mr Brooke, of Orpington."

"Are you acquainted with him ?" inquired the canon's wife.

"Oh ! yes ; I have met him several times."

"Well, I have no wish to know him—certainly not, after his mother's rude behaviour to the doctor ; so if you intend to speak to him, Fanny Clewson, we had better separate at once."

"I can't very well pass on, if he chooses to stop," returned Miss Clewson. She had but faint hopes, if any, that Nigel Brooke would desire to do more than bow to her, but faint as they were, she had no intention of resigning them for the sake of Mrs Prowse.

"You can do as you please," was that lady's tart reply ; "but, when I was young, it was considered right that a girl should try to elude a gentleman's notice, instead of courting it. However, here is a shop at which I have business to transact, so that you can have your own way with respect to Mr Brooke. Good-bye : " and Mrs Prowse disappeared beneath a confectioner's doorway just as Nigel Brooke's quick step had brought him face to face with Fanny Clewson.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NIGEL BROOKE THINKS THERE IS SAFETY IN FLIGHT.

THE Brookes of Orpington knew very few of the Hilstone people. The Chase was too far from the town for intimate intercourse, and Mrs Brooke was too indolent to go out of her way to seek society, so she confined her hospitalities to the few families living near, who had called upon her. Her son was better known, perhaps, being familiar at the barracks, whence he had found his

way into several of the best houses of Hilstone ; but he cared as little for what is termed society as his mother did. He was not a "party-going" man ; his long absence from England had destroyed his interest in the fashionable topics of the day ; and when he found himself in the presence of ladies who wanted to be amused with small talk, he felt like a fish out of water. It had never been his element ; it was less so than ever now. Even in Calcutta, where he knew everybody, he had always tried to avoid, rather than court, gaiety, and his chief reasons for making Orpington Chase his temporary abode were the country pleasures which it promised him, and the distance which lay between it and the town.

He might have commanded a good establishment in London had he so chosen ; and indeed his mother had never ceased to rail at him during the dark winter days that were past, for having brought her down into the cold and desolate country instead ; but Nigel Brooke could scarcely have lived elsewhere. Without his accustomed business he found time hang heavy on his hands ; without his hunting and his shooting, his horses and his dogs, it would have hung still heavier. He told his mother and his friends that it was the lack of regular occupation which thus fretted him ; but to himself he was forced to acknowledge there was another and a weightier reason for the languor of mind which he experienced. He had but to glance back to the first visit he had paid to Little Bickton, and the weeks spent in Nelly Brooke's society, by which it had been succeeded, to be convinced of the truth of his suspicion. Since the event of his grandfather's death, and the insults which he had then received at the hands of his cousin Robert, he had borne about with him in philosophic silence a very heavy heart. After his mother's first outburst of indignation had subsided, and his own discussions with Mr Ray had been closed, Nigel Brooke had never voluntarily mentioned the subject to anybody. So reserved, so silent was he upon this one topic, that even Mrs Brooke had come to perceive how painful it was to him, and ceased to speak of the delinquencies of either the brother or sister. Yet day after day had the generous heart of her son pondered if there were any possible means by which the quarrel between his cousin and himself could be made up without compromising his own dignity. But he had found none.

The wound had been given and received ; nothing could unmake it, and the pain must either be borne in silence, or suffered to heal itself.

And so had Nigel borne it, with a noble absence of complaint, but instead of healing, it had festered, and was eating into his very heart.

For he never disguised to himself that he loved his cousin Nelly. He loved her so much that he could not bear to think of her : that he put the thought of her sweet fresh face away from him whenever it arose, with a strong resolute hand that seemed as though it must crush out what could scarcely be more than a passing fancy. Nigel Brooke was not like poor little Nelly herself, ignorant of the reason why he suffered ; he had experienced the symptoms of love before, though in a less degree, and he knew that the passion must either be his master or his slave. And since it could not be the one he would make it the other. But this resolve was only in regard to himself. He had not forgotten the earnestness with which he had vowed to be his cousins' friend, and he was ready, only too ready, to help and succour Nelly at all times, and even Robert, for her sake.

He had not been much affected, as may be supposed, by his mother's rupture with her favourite doctor, which had taken place on the occasion of the latter demanding the address of her niece in Bickton, and declining to give his reasons for the demand.

He had not even connected the fact of Dr Monkton wanting that address with the idea that the man he so much disliked had fallen in love with the same girl as himself.

And even had he done so, Nigel Brooke would still have failed to feel alarm, lest any persuasion should tempt Nelly to become the doctor's wife. He had so high an opinion of her straightforwardness, so low a one of her suitor's, that he would have been ready on demand to take his oath that his innocent little cousin would prefer to remain single all her life to purchasing wealth and luxury upon such terms. He little knew the home influence to which she was subjected ; nor the strength of the cords of that love which drew her into a path directly opposed to her own inclinations.

When the final arrangements for the marriage were completed, Mr Ray, without consulting either Robert or Nelly, had written to inform Nigel Brooke of the contemplated event.

He had no particular object in doing so ; he had simply considered that the attention was due to a relative who had expressed so much interest in his wards, but he had little notion what a blow for his correspondent was contained in the few words in which he stated the fact.

For a second, Nigel Brooke had felt quite stunned by the shock which this news conveyed to him ; but then he had roused himself, he had determinately shaken off the despair which was beginning to creep into his heart, he had boldly spoken out the intelligence which was the death-blow to all his hopes : not only spoken of, but discussed it : not only discussed, but courted discussion on the subject.

Once convinced of the truth, he was resolved so to familiarise himself with the fact that when Nelly came back to Hilstone as Mrs Monkton, he should be able to meet her without shrinking, if not without pain.

He had answered Mr Ray's letter, and sent his congratulations to his cousin, in hopes they might be accepted : he had even renewed his offers of assistance in case it should be needed : he had listened patiently to Mrs Brooke's tirades upon the "iniquitous proceeding" as she termed the marriage of her niece with the discarded doctor : he had done all this, and suffered so much in doing it, that the sense of suffering seemed almost past, and he began to fancy that his powers of feeling were becoming blunted.

Yet he could not but confess the awkwardness of the chance which had thus cast his cousin's lot, under present circumstances, so near to Orpington : and he often meditated how he could best get rid of the Chase again, so that he might take his mother away to some place where they should not even run the risk of meeting Mrs Monkton of Hilstone. He was thinking of something connected with the same subject as he walked down the High Street on the Thursday morning alluded to, and came across Miss Fanny Clewson as she emerged from the confectioner's shop.

He was so deep in thought that he might almost have passed without noticing her, had she not said, "Good morning, Mr Brooke," in her soft, blandishing tones, as soon as he reached her side. Then he started ; and in another moment he had raised his hat, and accepted her proffered hand.

"Good morning ! Miss Clewson, what a beautiful day ! are you alone ?"

Miss Fanny, from beneath her long eyelashes, cast a deprecating glance at him.

"Now, Mr Brooke, how unkind ! when you know what a poor solitary creature I am, and that if I did not sometimes venture to take a little stroll by myself, I should seldom get one at all ;

everybody has not horses and carriages at their command like your mamma, remember. But I suppose you think it very wrong that a young lady should be seen walking in the town by herself."

Unused to the devices of modern young ladies to extract a compliment, Nigel Brooke appeared quite taken aback by this unfounded accusation.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "I assure you I had no ulterior motive for asking the question, excepting that, were it the case, I might hope to have the pleasure of strolling a little way by your side."

He had just as much wish to stroll by her side as he had to marry her off-hand, but it was the only method that occurred to him by which he could extricate himself from the difficulty her words had plunged him in, and Miss Fanny seeing nothing extraordinary in his desire, smiled a gracious acquiescence on the proposal, and commenced to saunter with him down the High Street.

"I should be more disposed to blame the lady who could be content to remain indoors during such glorious weather," he continued, accommodating his pace to hers; "the town looks quite gay, does it not?"

"It is right it should be so to-day, Mr Brooke, for this will be an anniversary for Hilstone, you know. Of course, I need not tell *you* who are expected to arrive at home this evening. You have come over yourself probably only to welcome the bride!"

She was perfectly aware, as was proved by her conversation with Mrs Prowse, that the disagreement between Dr Monkton and the people at Orpington would prevent any such friendly greeting passing between the cousins, at all events at first; but she longed to find out from Nigel Brooke's face whether the story, as she had heard it, was really true. To watch a family quarrel through all its phases, and gather interesting details wherewith to regale her friends' curiosity, was as exciting a pastime to Fanny Clewson as bull-baiting is said to be to the ladies of Madrid.

"Bride! what bride?" inquired Nigel Brooke.

The question was unaffected, for at that moment he was not thinking of his cousin Nelly; and at no time would he have given Miss Clewson credit for even knowing that they were related; so entirely had his interests been separate from those of his Hilstone acquaintances. But he was quickly undeceived.

"Why, your cousin, Mrs James Monkton, to be sure; Miss

Helen Brooke that was. She is your cousin, is she not, Mr Brooke?"

As Fanny Clewson put this inquiry to him, her sly eyes glanced furtively upwards to watch the effect of her words, and if her desire were to read Nigel Brooke's feelings on the subject in his face, it was amply gratified.

She had great satisfaction afterwards in being able to assure her cronies that she was certain he felt the estrangement dreadfully, and was altogether opposed to his cousin marrying Dr Monkton, for that directly she mentioned her name, he "went as pale as a sheet."

And so far she was correct; for an instant the pallor of death almost seemed to cross Nigel Brooke's countenance, and his resolute mouth was set more firmly than before, but his pride forbid his showing any other marks of concern at the intelligence which had come to him from so unexpected a quarter. He had forgotten that, whether he avoided Nelly's actual presence or not, he would be liable at every turn to hear of her sayings and doings from their mutual acquaintance. Yet so it was, and he met the first instalment of his trial bravely, for if there was any difference in the voice in which he answered Miss Clewson's question, it was rather more lively than usual.

"My cousin! to be sure she is; why it was at our house that Monkton first met her. But your news took me rather by surprise, Miss Clewson. Are you quite sure that they return to Hilstone to-day?"

"I am quite sure that they are expected to do so, for dear Mrs Prowse was just speaking to me about it, and she has had to turn out of her brother's house, you know, to make room for the bride. But of course you are acquainted with Mrs Prowse, Mr Brooke?—a charming person, is she not?"

"I have not that honour," he quietly remarked, alluding to the alleged acquaintanceship.

"No?—really—why, how is that? You are connected now, are you not? though I'm no judge, being very stupid about relationships. But let me see! How will you and Mrs Prowse stand with regard to one another? She being sister to your first cousin's husband, why, you'll all be cousins together, won't you? How charming that will be! I suppose we shall see a great deal of you in Hilstone now, Mr Brooke?"

There was no mistaking the intense curiosity which lurked beneath Miss Clewson's apparently innocent question, and Nigel

Brooke put himself on his guard. He had no wish that the estrangement between his cousins and himself should become a topic for general discussion in Hilstone; at the same time he hardly knew how to conceal the fact and yet answer her inquiries truthfully. He began to think it was time for him to go home.

"I am afraid I have never been a great patroniser of the town, Miss Clewson; and must confess to the open country possessing more attraction for me. However, I daresay I shall be here as often as before."

"Oh! oftener, surely! now that your cousin will be settled here. And her house is sure to be a most charming resort, for Dr Monkton is such an *immense* favourite with all the cathedral party that I am certain dear Mrs Filmer will call upon her directly she arrives, and then of course every one will follow suit."

Nigel Brooke felt his lip curling at the idea of Mrs Filmer's powerful patronage being extended to Nelly: but the thought possessed too much real pain to lose itself in sarcasm. For, added to the burden of his misplaced love, he experienced a terrible feeling of soreness and jealousy whenever he remembered on whom Nelly's choice had fallen. And the remembrance caused his present answer to be delivered with much bitterness.

"Doubtless, Miss Clewson, and also that the fact will be so grateful to my charming little cousin, that she will find quite sufficient to engross her attention on first arrival, without *my* intruding myself upon her presence; besides, newly-married persons are generally supposed to wish to see no one but each other, and I conclude these will be no exception to the rule; eh, Miss Clewson?"

At this, Miss Clewson giggled tremendously, declaring that she knew nothing at all about newly-married people or their wishes; and must leave Mr Brooke to decide the matter for himself.

The next minute she was heartily regretting that she had not made a better use of her opportunities, for Nigel Brooke had hastily bidden her farewell, and left her, asserting that a forgotten engagement called him at once in the opposite direction. Fanny Clewson would have given much to be admitted on visiting terms at the Chase (and once admitted, they would never, without a downright quarrel, have shaken themselves free of her again), and she had fully intended, before the conclusion of this interview, to secure Mr Brooke's promise to spend an evening in the almshouses with herself and her mamma. However, he was gone, and this time there was no help for it. She could only look after him with

wistful eyes, which, unfortunately, were lost upon him, as he never turned his head in her direction : and as soon as he was out of sight, she resumed her way with a sigh.

As for Nigel, he strode on without stopping until he reached the inn where he had put up his horse, when he mounted and rode straight home.

As he did so, he was angry with himself : he thought he had possessed more moral courage, more strength to encounter what was unavoidable. He had known, a month ago, that Nelly, as Dr Monkton's wife, must come home to live at Hilstone. He had tried to realise what it would be for him to meet her under this new aspect ; to see her and hear of her in the position which she had chosen for herself, and he had arrived at the conclusion, that since she had so chosen, it would be bearable. For, in this fact lay almost the bitterest portion of the cup he had to swallow. He silently argued, that if Nelly had voluntarily fallen in love with, and accepted a man like James Monkton, he must part with his own preconceptions of her purity, and candour, and simplicity. He had loved her so much for all this ; he loved her still so much for all he had believed her to be ; and yet he could not reconcile the two ideas. He could not imagine her willingly becoming the wife of the man whose first looks upon Hilstone Downs had made her shudder ; and yet remaining the lovable girl who had so charmed him with her winning, childish ways. He would have given his life to possess the one ; he felt as though he could care nothing for the other.

Satisfied with regard to the latter contingency, he had believed that, however much he might suffer through resigning the visionary Nelly, he was sufficiently schooled to meet the real one (should chance throw him in her way) without any inconvenient amount of mental disturbance.

And it was aggravating to find, that at the first mention of such a probability, he had felt as decided a twinge of cowardice as it had ever been his lot to experience.

Through all the midday heat of the fierce August sun, he rode on, bending beneath this weight of thought, and having reached the Chase, he threw his reins to a groom, and entering the house by a side-door, locked himself up in his bedroom.

He did not emerge thence the whole afternoon ; even his mother knew nothing of his return. Thinking that he was detained in Hilstone, she had ordered her carriage after luncheon as usual, and proceeded with one of the Miss Johnstones to take a country

drive, on returning from which, she was vastly surprised by the appearance of two portmanteaus, which, strapped ready for travelling, stood in the hall.

"Has any one arrived during my absence?" she demanded of the servant who let her in.

"No, madam, no one. These portmanteaus belong to Mr Brooke."

"Mr Brooke? impossible! he is going nowhere."

"These are my master's portmanteaus, madam," was the man's decisive rejoinder, and she flew past him to demand an explanation of her son.

"Nigel, are you going anywhere?"

He was in the library, listlessly examining the newspapers, and the eyes which he raised at his mother's breathless inquiry, were very languid ones.

"Yes, mother; I am—I intend to run up to town to-night for a few weeks."

"Have you business there?"

Nigel did not always approve of the sharp manner in which Mrs Brooke would question him respecting his comings and goings; she was too apt to forget the age he had attained, and to speak to him as if he were still a boy. He was accustomed, on such occasions, slightly to put her down, although he never forgot the respect due to her as his mother.

"Well, none of which it would interest you to hear, or that concerns you either. It will not detain me long, I daresay, and I do not wish to be absent after the thirtieth."

He had no business, except to try and get rid of his aching heart, but he thirsted to get away from the place which perhaps at that moment contained his cousin Nelly. He felt that he needed still further preparation before he could breathe the same air with the indifference which he coveted. What was she after all, this little rustic beauty, that he should not find it possible to forget her amid the excitement provided by a town life. London need never be quite void to the mere pleasure-seeker, and Nigel Brooke had no higher motive in going there. He wanted to forget, and he could not forget while sitting still at Orpington. Although he so seldom left home for his own amusement, his mother seemed, in this instance, to suspect that his plea was a feigned one, for she answered sharply:

"Well, it seems strange to me that you should choose to spend half the season down at this place, and then go up to London

when there is nothing to be done there. What am I to do if Captain Pooley and Mr Maxwell, and any of the other gentlemen whom you have invited for the shooting season, arrive before you return?"

"They are not likely to be here before the thirtieth," he replied, quietly, "and I have told you that I will be home by that date. This is only the fifth of the month."

"It must be very important business to detain you for three weeks."

"It is important."

"And it seems to have come upon you very suddenly."

"Yes, mother, it has done so," he returned, with an inward sigh as he recalled how sudden the intelligence had appeared to him.

"Well, Nigel," resumed Mrs Brooke, with an air of dissatisfaction, "I cannot make it out at all, I am sure you are hiding something from me; and all I can say is, that, if it is business connected with the house, I think you are very wrong. Your poor dear father would never have done so, not even when we were first married; and of late years he was wont to say that he could not keep so much as a thought from me."

Nigel, having been much in his father's confidence before his death, fancied that he had heard him give vent to a very different opinion concerning the trust he reposed in his wife, and say, that if he wanted a thing proclaimed throughout Calcutta, he had but to give her a hint of it; but the remembrance had no power to provoke a smile from him now.

He merely answered:

"And he was quite right to do so, mother, and if the house is ever threatened with any crisis, in which your circumspection and advice can be of aid to us, you may rest assured it shall not be kept from you. But in this instance my business has nothing to do with our commercial affairs, nor could it be benefited by any counsel, even from so clear a head as your own; else I should be thankful indeed to any one who could help me to accomplish it."

The last words were uttered in so low a tone, that Mrs Brooke did not catch their import, but her self-love had received sufficient gratification from her son's previous compliment to render her indifferent to anything further, and it was with a smile of intense satisfaction that she linked her arm in his, saying that, since he was probably in a hurry to start, she would dispense that day

with dressing for dinner, and join him as soon as she had laid aside her bonnet and shawl.

Nigel thanked her for her complaisance ; and longed then, and several times before he left Orpington, to tell her of her niece's expected arrival in Hilstone, and ask how, in the event of their meeting, she intended to act.

But he dared not.

Middle-aged man, as he styled himself, he was too shyly ashamed of this sweet, secret love of his, to be able to mention its subject with any show of interest, even before his mother. He was so terribly afraid that she would link his sudden departure with Nelly's sudden arrival ; and guess how deeply he was wounded. So he left the Chase, without provoking further comment on the reason of his flight.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MRS PROWSE FINDS HER REIGN IS OVER.

As soon as the figures of Fanny Clewson and Nigel Brooke had repassed the confectioner's shop, Mrs Prowse thrust her head from the door to gaze after them.

"The forward thing," she inwardly ejaculated as she watched the twists and bends of the lady's body, and could imagine the smirks by which they were accompanied. "I do believe she considers herself a beauty. However, I'll take care that Mrs Filmer hears of this ; for if she only half knew the way in which Fanny Clewson goes on, I am sure she would never let her be so intimate with her dear Laura."

"A seed-cake or a plum-cake, did you say, ma'am ?" inquired the mild voice of the confectioner's wife, recalling Mrs Prowse to a sense of her position.

"Oh ! a seed-cake, if you please, Mrs Priddings, and a pound of mixed biscuits, and half-a-dozen Abernethys, for 15 St Bartholomew's Street, you know," with a meaning smile, "and the Abernethys must be quite fresh, because the doctor won't touch them unless they are so."

"Oh, certainly, ma'am. I will send up some of to-day's baking, and very glad to hear that they will be required," with a half curtsy, and a look intended to indicate that Mrs Priddings knew all about it. "And I trust that I may be fortunate enough

to keep the custom of No. 15, ma'am, now that you've left it; for we've always tried to give every satisfaction, and"—

"There is little doubt of that, Mrs Priddings," returned her patroness, "and considering that you serve the deanery, and every house of any consequence in the cloisters, I should be very much surprised if Dr Monkton expressed any wish to change."

"Yes! that's true, ma'am," said the confectioner, doubtfully, "but still ladies have their fancies, you see; and Mr Muffet has some very powerful friends on his side."

"I beg you will not name Muffet in connection with my brother's house, Mrs Priddings," exclaimed Mrs Prowse, decidedly. "Even he did wish to make a change, it is not in the slightest degree likely that he would consent to deal with a man who exclusively supplies the barracks. Dr Monkton belongs to the cathedral, Mrs Priddings, and will only deal with the cathedral tradespeople."

"Of course, ma'am, and I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so, and very considerate of the doctor, too; but still as his lady may have her fancies, Priddings and me, we should feel much obliged if you'd be so good as to put in a word for us when there's an occasion. For the cook from No. 15 did send to fetch French rolls from Mr Muffet's only this morning, for my little boy see the girl both going in and coming out, and not for the first time either."

"Emma dealing at Muffet's without my orders!" exclaimed Mrs Prowse with horror. "I shall inquire into this immediately, Mrs Priddings, and you may depend it will never happen again. But are you sure it was not a mistake?"

"Dear me, ma'am—quite sure! Billy knows the girl Martha as well as he do his sister, and she nodded to him from across the way, too. I must say I felt it, and our own windows blocked up with French rolls the while."

"I am *astonished*; I can hardly *believe* it," said Mrs Prowse indignantly. "Dealing at Muffet's, and directly my back is turned! However, she must give me very good reasons for doing so, or I'm afraid she will have cause to regret it. Good morning, Mrs Priddings. You will send the cake and biscuits over in the course of an hour, please, as I can't be spared from the deanery to-night, and I wish to see everything in readiness for Dr and Mrs Monkton before they arrive." And away bustled Mrs Prowse to St Bartholomew's Street, followed by the envy of such of Mrs Priddings' customers as had heard her last words, which was only due to the

unfortunate woman who could not be "spared" from the sacred deanery table.

Arrived at No. 15, Mrs Prowse turned the door-handle with a decision that seemed to say she still considered herself regnant there; and passing through the hall into the dining-room, enthroned herself in an arm-chair, and authoritatively rang the bell.

It was answered by a man in plain clothes, who was half a butler and half Dr Monkton's confidential servant.

"Long!" said the canon's wife sharply, "desire Emma to come here at once."

The man bowed and disappeared, repeating Mrs Prowse's order the next minute to the cook in these words: "Here, Emma! the cat's in the dining-room, and wants you immediately."

Emma was a smiling, round-faced woman by nature, but the expression with which she greeted her late mistress was gloom itself.

"What will you please to be wanting, ma'am?" she inquired with an air which seemed to add, "You've no business here now, and I have not the least intention of attending to anything you may say."

But the manner, if it attracted Mrs Prowse's notice, only served to increase her determination.

"I wish to know, Emma," she commenced in the most dignified tone, "if it is true that since my departure from this house, you have been dealing with Muffet the baker. Now, don't tell me a falsehood, because I know all about it already."

"Well! if you know all about it, ma'am," replied Emma, doggedly, "it can't be any use my telling you."

"Don't dare be impertinent to me, Emma," cried Mrs Prowse in her shrill voice, "or I shall complain to my brother about you. You have not answered my question. Have you sent for bread to Muffet's during Dr Monkton's absence?"

"Yes, ma'am, I have," the servant said, firmly.

"And pray, why? Don't you know that I never permitted anything from that man's shop to enter this house whilst I was in it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," was the laconic reply.

"You *do*?" exclaimed Mrs Prowse, in a tone of the utmost surprise. "You acknowledge that you remembered my orders, and yet you disobeyed them. What can you be thinking of?"

"When you was mistress in this house, ma'am," said Emma, who, because she dared not show the rage she felt, had com-

menced to whimper, "I never disobeyed one of your orders, as I'm aware of; but I never understood, nor would any one else, as they were to continue after you'd left the house. We've a new mistress now, ma'am, and we shall be laid under new orders; and till they're given I don't hold myself responsible to nobody. As for Mr Muffet, he's quite as good a tradesman as Mr Priddings, any day, and better; and the doctor's written orders are, that we're to lay in everything of the very best; so, till he, or his lady, gives me directions to the contrary, I shall continue to deal with Mr Muffet. And I'm quite ready to take the blame, ma'am, for anything I do." And here the cook paused to hear what her late mistress had to say in reply to her speech.

Mrs Prowse had turned white with indignation, but she felt that her day in No. 15 was over, and that perhaps it would be better to compromise matters a little.

"But, Emma, Muffet is essentially a military baker. He serves no one of any consequence in the cloisters, and I think the cathedral gentry are bound to keep to their own tradesmen."

"That's for the new mistress to decide, I suppose, ma'am, and of course, as I said before, if she likes to deal with Priddings, I've nothing to say for or against it; but I know good bread when I see it, and Muffet's bread is by far the best, and always has been. And no wonder, too, for the military knows what they're about, and always deals with the best shops in the town. And as for that there Priddings, they wouldn't take his bread from him, not as a gift."

This heterodox speech savoured so strongly of rebellion against the powers that were, that the canon's wife deemed it advisable to change the subject.

"Well! cook," she replied, rising from her throne and looking far more like the conquered than the conqueror, "I suppose we had better leave it for the present, and wait till we hear what your master has to say on the subject. Have you heard from him to-day?"

"Mr Long have had a letter by the morning's post, I believe," replied Emma, not much more pleasantly than before, "which said as they'd be home this evening to a seven o'clock dinner precisely."

"And have you everything ready for them?"

"Everything, ma'am."

"Well, that is sufficient, then. I shall go up-stairs now, and see what Elizabeth is doing with the rest of the house." And

the cook, only too glad to close the interview, let the lady pass her in order to gain the staircase, whilst she escaped to her own regions.

The large square upper landing peculiar to old-fashioned houses, upon which Mrs Prowse emerged, was blocked up with bedroom-chairs and tables, and towel-horses, indicative of a general cleaning. Yet not so much so, but that her quick eyes at once discerned the form of a tabby cat, which was lazily sunning itself in the broad window-sill before which there usually stood a stand of flowers. Now, if Mrs Prowse hated children, she hated animals still more. She was used to say that though the first were a necessary and unavoidable evil, no one but a fool would needlessly endure the presence of the last, and during her residence in her brother's house not a cat or a dog had dared to show itself above the kitchen floor. She would even drive the sparrows from her window-sill, and go out of her way to crush, with vicious pleasure, the beetles or other insects which she encountered in her walks. The sight of the rebellious tabby, thus calmly washing its face within forbidden precincts, roused Mrs Prowse's ire. She had not dared resent the human opposition with which she had just met below; but she flew at the unconsciously offending animal, as if it had been Emma herself she was about to chastise, and brought down her closed parasol with such force upon its round soft head and shoulders that the handle snapped in two. The cat flew, with a squall such as cats alone can give, across the landing and down the stairs, and the upper housemaid, whose especial pet it was, rushing from the bedroom to the rescue of her favourite, encountered Mrs Prowse, pale with passion and panting from exertion, with the broken parasol, telling its own tale, in her hand.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, ma'am," said Elizabeth, with scarlet cheeks; "but I thought I heard the cat cry out," and she looked about, as if for some traces of her tabby.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs Prowse as soon as she could speak, "what do you mean, Elizabeth, by allowing that brute up on this floor when you know the only condition on which it was permitted to remain in the house, was, that it never left the kitchen?"

"It doesn't do any harm," replied the woman, her face clouding over at once, just as the cook's had done "there couldn't be a cleaner animal, and she never jumped on a bed since she's been here."

"I don't care whether she jumps on the beds or not, Elizabeth; my orders are, that she is kept in the kitchen, and I'll have no animals of any sort about the upper floors." And then, remembering that she had no longer the right to issue such commands, Mrs Prowse judiciously added, "at least, it is nothing to me now, of course, whether it is so or not, but I am quite certain that your new mistress will wish to be as particular as I am."

"Well! ma'am, my mistress will be home to-night, and then I can ask her," returned the housemaid, with anything but a good grace, as she glanced at the broken parasol and remembered the treatment to which her cat had been subjected.

"What are you turning out both the bedrooms for?" next inquired the irate lady; "there is no occasion for it whatever; the spare room was thoroughly cleaned not a month ago, and no one has slept in it since."

The two principal bedrooms in the house, with dressing-rooms adjoining, stood on opposite sides of that floor. One was destined as the apartment of Dr and Mrs Monkton: the other had always been reserved as a guest-chamber: Mr and Mrs Prowse, even whilst they lived in St Bartholomew's Street, having occupied a room on the upper story.

"We had orders to do so," returned the housemaid sullenly.

"Orders! from whom?"

"From the doctor, ma'am."

"And who is to sleep in it, pray?"

"Mr Brooke, I believe, the new mistress's brother."

"Mr Brooke? but he can't be coming here yet awhile."

"The young gentleman's coming to-night, ma'am," here put in Martha, the under-housemaid, delighted with the prospect of seeing Mrs Prowse's discomfiture at the news. She was not disappointed. The face of the canon's wife, which had at first only expressed incredulity, now turned gray with the knowledge that the servants of the house had been better informed with respect to her brother's intentions than herself.

"Who told you so?" she demanded sharply.

"'Twas writ in the letter that Mr Long received," replied the girl.

"Go down at once and fetch it. I am surprised that they should have presumed to keep such intelligence from me."

The letter was produced, and Mrs Prowse convinced herself that she had not been misinformed. The doctor desired that the

guest-chamber should be thoroughly prepared for the occupation of Mr Brooke; and further intimated that Mrs Monkton would be accompanied by an attendant who would require a bedroom to herself.

Mrs Prowse was confounded, She knew that men were generally rather insane at such times, and disposed to do very foolish things; but she had given James credit for more sense than this. To bring home a brother-in-law the very day he returned himself—and to permit his wife to keep a maid who was too fine to sleep with the other servants, appeared in her eyes the very height of folly: to say nothing of her never having been consulted in the matter.

She could have forgiven anything sooner than this; but she could not bear to feel that she was nobody in the establishment where she had reigned supreme. She was so indignant at the way in which everything had been arranged without the slightest reference to herself, that the daring insolence of cats and cooks alike faded from her mind, and nothing was worth mentioning in comparison with the best room (which had been considered too good for her and Mr Prowse), being set in order for a young bachelor's use. But her great desire was, that the servants should not guess she felt thus affronted.

"Take this back to Long," she said with a lofty air, extending the letter to Martha, "and tell him that I see there is nothing in it but what Dr Monkton has already written to myself. As for Mr Brooke, he may, or may not arrive with them to-night. The room is only to be prepared in case he does do so. And it is right it should be ready to receive guests at all times. And he can tell his master from me that I am sorry I shall not be able to look in upon them this evening, as they have a dinner-party at the deanery, and Mrs Filmer cannot do without me; but that I shall be sure to step over the first thing to-morrow morning;" and so saying, Mrs Prowse, securing the fragments of her parasol, left the house with what she intended to be a very dignified demeanour.

"And a good thing, too," said Mr Long, when the housemaid flew down to the kitchen to deliver the message which ended with the intimation that the doctor's sister would be seen no more that day. "She's no business to come here bothering and poking her nose into everything, and I hope the new mistress will put a stop to it."

"She's got her own servants to bully now," remarked the cook, "to say nothing of the poor dear canon to worry and hustle as

she chooses. Why can't she leave us alone, we're none of hers, be thankful !"

"I'd half a mind to let her know *my* opinion of her," said the housemaid as she caressed the tabby cat, "a going and hitting a poor defenceless animal like this. She ought to have a stick over her own back. 'Twould do her a mint of good."

"I was so glad she broke her parasol," giggled the girl Martha, "she's that stingy, that it'll quite go to her heart to pay sixpence for its being mended."

"Yes ! if she have a heart," interposed the footman, who had not, as yet, joined in the discussion, "but I don't think we saw much of it whilst she was here, nor yet no one else."

"But she's precious hartful, all the same," remarked the cook, delighted at her own wit.

"Now, I'll tell you what it is, young women," said the butler, thinking the conversation had lasted long enough, "until the doctor comes home, I'm master here, and my orders are, that you all go about your business, or neither house nor dinner will be ready against they come. And if you consider, John, that reading that there newspaper will clean your plate, it's more than I do, so I'll be obliged if you'll go into your pantry and finish your morning's work."

Whereupon the group dispersed laughing, and telling Mr Long that he was a regular "old woman," and "every inch as bad as the cat herself."

Meanwhile the "cat," blissfully ignorant of the comments so freely passed upon her behaviour, was returning to her own house, whence she issued in gorgeous raiment to adorn the deanery dinner-table just about the same time that Nelly Monkton crossed the threshold of her new home, and Nigel Brooke entered the railway carriage which was to put half a hundred miles between his cousin and himself.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MEETING OF THE SISTERS-IN-LAW.

THE principal reason for which the canon's wife was so frequently asked to the deanery, was, that she might be seated for the greater part of the evening behind an urn at a side-table, pouring out tea and coffee for the guests ; from which position she was probably released only to take a hand at cribbage with the dean ;

or planted by his side to amuse him by shouting a summary of the local news into his ear, whilst the rest of the visitors were at liberty to entertain themselves. All Hilstone knew the secret of her constant appearance there; even Mrs Filmer did not hesitate to confess that the reason she found it so difficult to spare Mrs Prowse from her dinner-parties, was the use the woman was to her: only Mrs Prowse herself refused to see the indignity to which she was subjected; and firmly believed that she was not only the faithful coadjutor of the dean's daughter-in-law, but her most valued friend. On the present occasion she must have been blind indeed, and deaf into the bargain, not to see the shrugged shoulders with which Captain Herbert Filmer saluted her entrance to the drawing-room, nor to hear the half tones, too loud to be called a whisper, in which he uttered the words—

“Good heavens! that detestable woman here again! When are we to be freed from her presence?”

“Hush! Herbert! pray!” his sister had replied; “if she were to overhear what you say, and take offence at it, I don't know what mamma would do—she's her right hand.”

“Her toady—flatterer—fawner—spaniel—you mean,” he answered; “why don't you call things by their right names, Laura?”

“Any way, mamma couldn't get on without her,” said his sister, laughing; and there the dispute had ended.

But even had Mrs Prowse overheard Captain Filmer's complimentary remarks, they would have been more than outbalanced the next moment by the familiar manner in which his mother called her “Matilda” before the assembled company, and inquired if her brother and his wife had yet arrived in Hilstone.

“You must tell the doctor to call round and see me in the morning,” said Mrs Filmer, in her hard, unmodulated voice, “we can't do without him any more than we can do without you; and I shall go and see his wife after a day or two. She's fresh from the country—isn't she? Well, don't let her frighten herself about receiving me—tell her I shan't eat her!” and the mistress of the deanery finished up her speech with a coarse grating laugh which was appreciated by no one but Mrs Prowse.

“If my mother doesn't eat the bride, she bids fair to break the drums of her ears, if she salutes her after that fashion,” remarked Captain Filmer, professing to shudder beneath the infliction; “shall you call with her, Laura?”

“I suppose I shall be obliged to do so, whether I wish it or no.”

"Oh, well ! that's all right, then ; because you can report on the lady's appearance before I decide whether to follow suit ; for if Monkton has chosen a wife anything like his sister, I know it will be a long while before he catches me within his doors."

But Mrs Prowse was enchanted with the condescension of her dear Mrs Filmer. She was certain that her sister-in-law would be fully alive to the honour of the intended visit ; and if she were a little shy and overcome at first, she trusted that Mrs Filmer would excuse it, on the score of her youth ; and the great trial it must be to a young girl so quietly brought up, to find herself all at once transformed into the mistress of an establishment like her brother's, and called upon to receive such honoured and distinguished guests.

"Pooh !" was Captain Filmer's irreverent exclamation, upon the conclusion of the above speech ; "Mrs Monkton must have been reared deep in the country indeed if she has never seen an old woman before. Now, I'll wager a hundred to one that I'd make her more shy and confused by looking at her for half-an-hour, than my mother would by jawing at her for six."

"O Herbert ! I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense," rejoined his sister, with a warning pluck at his sleeve, as she observed more than one young lady giggling at his wit, who would be sure to repeat it directly she reached home.

But his remarks were not overheard by his mother or Mrs Prowse ; and the latter spent an evening of such unalloyed content that it totally erased the memory of the unpleasant scene which had preceded it.

She returned to her own house, full of stories of her friend's condescension and amiability, which she volubly repeated to Mr Prowse, a mild, inoffensive-looking man, who had not accompanied her to the deanery. Indeed, he never went into society unless he was absolutely obliged to do so, and was wont to say in private to his familiars, that where his wife was, she left no room for him, and therefore it was little use their going to the same house.

"And where do you think I have been, my dear ?" he ventured to ask at the conclusion of one of her lengthy eulogiums.

"How should I guess ?" she replied, sharply. She could not help speaking so, even when best pleased, for there was no softness in her nature. "Puzzling your head over your next sermon, I suppose, or moping about the garden. You had much better have come to the deanery. I never spent a more delightful evening."

"But I fancy I have spent quite as delightful an evening, and perhaps even more so," returned Canon Prowse, who could sometimes be bold, even in the presence of his wife. She looked up at him; her large black eyes dilated with surprise, and he continued—

"I have been over at your brother's, my dear, and introduced to his wife."

"Oh! is that all?" replied Mrs Prowse, who was nevertheless not over-pleased that her husband should have been the first to see the new-comer. "Well, what is she like? I had no idea you thought of going there so soon."

"No more I did, my dear!" said the canon, almost apologetically, "but the doctor came over here, in hopes, I suppose, of seeing yourself, and finding I was alone, made me return with him. Oh! such a fresh, charming young creature, Matilda; she will be quite the glory of Hilstone."

"Are you speaking of James's wife?" demanded Mrs Prowse, affecting to misunderstand his allusion.

"Of course I am, my dear. She has the sweetest face, I think, I have ever seen; and her poor brother, although otherwise much afflicted, is, in respect of feature, scarcely behind herself. They both appear to be most interesting young people—but I was not prepared, from your account, to find that your brother had married a beauty!"

Now, Mrs Prowse was not readily disposed (what woman would be?) to sympathise in such rhapsodies regarding the stranger from her usually sedate and apathetic husband.

"Well! I always knew that men are fools when they're in love," she retorted, "but I must say I thought James had more sense than to be led away by mere beauty. A girl who has a very pretty face is generally good for nothing but to be looked at, though it remains to be proved," she added, with a spiteful glance at the offending canon, "whether she is such a beauty, after all! *Some* men are fools, whether they're in love or out of love; and I prefer to decide the matter for myself to taking an opinion second-hand. So I shall go over the first thing to-morrow morning, and see this paragon, who is to set all Hilstone on fire by your account, when I shall be better able to judge of the truth of the assertion. Meanwhile, I hope I shan't sleep any the worse for the delay of a few hours in the introduction;" and seizing the bedroom candlestick, with a look of supreme contempt for the weakness of her husband's sentiments, Mrs Prowse, with a jerk, preceded him out of the apartment.

The unfortunate canon, condemning his folly in having betrayed his admiration for the doctor's bride, and fearful lest he should not yet have heard the last of it, followed her with down-cast looks

When his wife had reached the middle of the staircase, she turned and addressed him so suddenly, that in his fright and surprise he nearly fell down the remainder of the flight.

"Why has the brother come down with them?" she demanded, with asperity.

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," he falteringly replied: "how should I know?—it is no business of mine; I never even thought of asking."

"You never think of anything," was the uncomplimentary reply; "but I consider that it is my business, and I shall make a point of putting the question to James directly I see him. I never heard of such an arrangement in my life before, and the young man himself ought to have had too much good feeling to consent to it, whoever the proposal came from. However, it's quite plain to me that it's some of your 'paragon's' doings; men are not usually so attached to their brothers-in-law that they can't part with them for a day; but the manner in which James has behaved altogether concerning his marriage has been extraordinary—most extraordinary, indeed!—and I think he must be going out of his mind."

"I know nothing about it, my dear. I really know nothing but what I have told you—it is of no use your speaking to me like this," repeated her husband, plaintively, as they reached the top of the staircase.

"Bah! whoever said you did?" exclaimed the lady angrily, as she bounced into her dressing-room and slammed the door in his face.

The canon heaved a sigh, and sought the shelter of his room, wishing from the bottom of his heart meanwhile, that French customs were English ones, and that he might have been permitted to remain there altogether. But he was destined to suffer no more martyrdom that night, for Mrs Prowse's excitement, added to the exertions of the evening, fortunately for him, had tired her out; and when he rejoined her she was not only too sleepy to scold him any more, but rose so late the following morning, that it was nearly one o'clock before she found herself at the door of No. 15 St Bartholomew's Street.

She entered the house, as usual, without knock or ring; and

searched the library (which was also her brother's consulting-room), the dining-room, and the drawing-room, all three of which apartments were on the ground floor, without success.

They were all empty, with the exception of the last, where she encountered the housemaid Elizabeth, carrying off an old-fashioned table from one of the recesses.

"Why are you moving that table?" demanded the visitor, forgetting her lesson of the day before.

"It is my mistress's orders," replied Elizabeth, with a look of triumph as she left the room bearing the article in question.

Mrs Prowse, too ruffled by the servant's manner to stoop to further parley, permitted her to go in peace, and rang the bell for Long instead.

"Where is your master?" she asked, as the man appeared.

"My master was obliged to go out this morning, ma'am, to take over his practice from the gentleman who has been acting for him ; but he desired me, if any one called, to say that he hoped to be back to luncheon."

"But Mrs Monkton?" snapped the canon's wife.

"I believe my mistress is up-stairs, ma'am : I will inform her that you are here."

"Tell her, if you please, that Mrs Prowse, Dr Monkton's sister, is waiting to see her," returned the lady, drawing up her small person on a sofa with all the dignity it could assume.

She did not half like being thus treated as an ordinary visitor at No. 15, but if it was to be so, she would exact all the attention due to a stranger.

So Long departed, leaving her seated in solitary state in the large formal drawing-room, in which no sound was audible save the buzzing of a huge bumble-bee which had been attracted by the boxes of mignonette standing outside the windows.

All this appeared very unorthodox and irregular in the eyes of Mrs Prowse.

Her notion of a bride was of a blushing, bashful young lady, robed in silk, both bright and tight, with a gold watch-chain tastefully disposed across her bosom, and sitting stiffly up to receive her visitors from after breakfast until nightfall. She felt that if her brother James's wife had known the proper etiquette to be observed upon such an occasion, she would not have been left for so long a time to the resources of her own imagination ; whilst all the pretty things she had intended to say upon first meeting were evaporating one by one beneath her sense of neglect. But

if to find the state-room empty shocked Mrs Prowse, how much more were her ideas of propriety outraged when (the doors being left open on account of the heat) she distinctly heard Long's arrival on the upper floor, and announcement of her august presence, followed by the words—rung out in a clear girlish voice—

“Mrs Prowse? Oh, please ask her to walk up here.”

Her flimsy dignity was so much wounded by this fancied affront, that she was very nearly leaving the house then and there, and refusing to return without an apology from her unknown sister-in-law. But she had hardly had time to settle the point, before Long reappeared with a request that she would follow him upstairs, and she found herself on the upper landing before she well knew what she was about. Once there, all other feelings were banished by the astonishment which she felt at the scene which it presented. The corridor was even more blocked up by boxes and articles of furniture than it had been the day before, whilst servants were busily engaged in rearranging the order of the apartments; and from the midst of the confusion came forward, with shyly-extended hand, a girl, simply attired in a brown muslin dress, with violet eyes set in a broad white forehead, and a profusion of sunny hair falling about her shoulders.

Mrs Prowse, like most dark women, was extremely envious of a fair skin, and she took a jealous dislike at first sight to her brother's wife.

Nelly was, indeed, looking her best; for a month of sequestered life had removed much of the healthy but unbecoming tan from her face and hands, whilst her hair, arranged in a more fashionable though not less graceful manner, and the extra attention which she had been compelled to pay to her dress, all tended to improve her personal appearance.

“I hope you will excuse my asking you up here,” she said, with a courtesy rendered perfect from being genuine, and quite unconscious how nearly she had affronted her new connexion by doing so; “but we are very busy arranging my brother's room, and as he likes to be much by himself, he will not feel quite at home until it is completed. Pray walk in.” And shaking hands with the canon's wife (Nelly was not a woman who could embrace a perfect stranger) she essayed to lead her into what had been the dressing-room of the guest-chamber. But directly Mrs Prowse had crossed the threshold, she started back with an exclamation of almost childish terror, for close to the sofa occupied by Robert Brooke, with heaving flanks, red eyeballs, and tongue

lolling out of his mouth from the heat, lay extended the huge mastiff, Thug. As Mrs Prowse cried out, Nelly thought she must have hurt herself; and could not imagine why the two housemaids should smile and furtively nudge each other's elbows; but a solution of the mystery was soon afforded by the frightened visitor herself.

"Oh! I couldn't go in there," she exclaimed. "I really couldn't sit in the same room with that animal. Do you mean to tell me, Mrs James, that my brother permits such a creature to roam about the house?"

"What! Thug?" said Nelly, infinitely amused at the idea of any one being alarmed at the appearance of a dog. "Oh, he is the most harmless fellow possible, Mrs Prowse! I assure you there is nothing whatever to fear; I have had him from a little puppy; he wouldn't hurt a fly unless he were told:" and she knelt down by the mastiff's side as she spoke, and squeezed his broad head confidently beneath her arm, a proceeding of which Thug appeared greatly to approve, if his loving, grateful glance might be accepted as a token of his pleasure. But Mrs Prowse would not be reasoned out of her aversion to enter the room whilst the animal remained in it. She was not really afraid of Thug, but she disapproved of the presence of any of the brute creation about a dwelling-house; the principle was a bad one, and though her brother might be so foolish, in the first flush of his wedded happiness, as to allow such a thing without reproof, she considered it was her duty to put a stop to it for him, and to see that his wife was as particular about his comfort as she had been. So, notwithstanding Nelly's renewed persuasions, and Robert Brooke's look of amazement, and the housemaids' delighted titters, Mrs Prowse obstinately remained in the doorway holding up her silken skirts, and maintaining that it was quite impossible she could sit down in the same apartment as a dog.

"If you are really afraid of him," said Nelly, after a while, "I will send him away;" and then addressing her favourite, "Come, Thug, you must go for the present; good dog, go and lie down;" and shutting the mastiff into the bedroom, she redirected her attention to her visitor.

"Now that the enemy has been put to flight," she said, smiling, "you must let me introduce my brother to you."

The young man returned Mrs Prowse's stiff bow from his sofa; but the looks which the new acquaintances interchanged were not very cordial ones; he despising the lady for her affected

terror and snappish voice, and she hating him simply for being there.

"I am not fond of animals," she said, as she seated herself, feeling her late conduct required a little explanation, "and I especially disapprove of them about a house; I never allowed them up-stairs while I was my brother's housekeeper, and I hope, Mrs James, that you will pursue a similar course of action, for I am sure that, in reality, he dislikes them as much as I do."

"Dr Monkton dislike animals!" exclaimed Nelly; "oh! I am sure he does not. He is almost as fond of Thug as I am; and there was a beautiful tabby cat came up to breakfast with us this morning, and he nursed it on his knee nearly all the time. I love animals, Mrs Prowse; I shouldn't mind if the house were full of them, both birds and beasts. I left three dear cats behind me at Bickton; but only because I knew they would be unhappy if I brought them away, so I mean to make a great pet of the tabby, and have been teaching Thug to be friends with her already."

Nelly's enthusiasm was so genuine, and the maids were looking so pleased at the open avowal of their new mistress's tastes, that Mrs Prowse deemed it advisable to change the subject.

"What are you doing to this room?" she inquired, presently; "you seem to me to be pulling it all to pieces."

"And so I am," laughed Nelly; "I am turning it into a smoking and sitting-room for Bertie. We have given him the bedroom next to it, and as he does not need a dressing-room, this will be very convenient for him to sit in. He is not able to move about much, you know," she added, with a glance of fond compassion towards the recumbent figure on the sofa.

But at this first piece of news Mrs Prowse almost felt her breath taken away. Not only was her brother James reported to have sat down to breakfast with the kitchen cat upon his knee, but the guest-chamber and its dressing-room, the apartments which were considered too good for the use of the canon and herself, were destined to be defiled by the tobacco-smoke of a bachelor.

"But doesn't it seem a pity," she almost gasped in her indignant surprise, "a great pity to you, Mrs James, that all this nice furniture, and the curtains and carpet, should be spoilt by the fumes of tobacco? My brother never smokes; he considers it a very bad habit, very injurious to the health, and quite unfit for a domestic character."

"I wish he did smoke," returned Nelly, carelessly; "I think

every doctor should do so, because it is said to prevent infection. Anyway, Bertie couldn't live without it. But he never smokes a cigar in the house; and pipes can't do any harm, you know."

Mrs Prowse did not "know" anything about it, for though her poor, patient canon did occasionally indulge in a forbidden weed, it was without her cognisance, and always far enough removed from any chance of discovery. Yet, unwilling to dismiss the grievance without another attempt at its remedy, she continued—

"But surely it is taking a great deal of trouble to move the dressing-table and washing-stand, and all these other articles, for so short a time. It would be different if it were for a permanency."

But Nelly was perfectly innocent of comprehending the conveyed insinuation.

"I should never think any trouble too great to take for Bertie," she answered, simply; "and I have no doubt that this arrangement will be a permanent one, for I do not see where he could change to, or what other room in the house would suit him so well."

"But this is the guest-room," returned Mrs Prowse, almost panting with suppressed excitement.

"Oh, I hope we shall not have any guests for a long time," said Nelly, laughing, "and when they do come, they must go upstairs. I could not have put Bertie there, because moving up and down is such an exertion to him. Besides, he would not have been near myself, and we have never been separated, even by a floor: and never shall be, as long as I can help it."

At this moment the sound of a gong reverberated through the house.

"That is the summons to luncheon, I suppose," cried Nelly, starting from her chair. "You can leave these things for the present, Elizabeth, and tell nurse to come and wait upon Mr Brooke. You will stay and take luncheon with us, Mrs Prowse, will you not? and then, I daresay, you will see James. As for you, darling," stooping to kiss her brother, "I will send yours up by Aggie, and you must be sure and eat it all. And I shall be ready to go out with you, either in the garden or elsewhere, as soon as ever you wish it yourself."

"But, Mrs James, shall you not wait luncheon until my brother returns?" inquired Mrs Prowse, as Nelly stepped over the threshold and invited her by a sign to follow.

"What! wait until Dr Monkton comes home?" exclaimed the girl, with elevated eyebrows; "but he may not be back for another hour, Mrs Prowse, and I'm as hungry as I can be. And *pray* don't call me 'Mrs James,' " she added, in a pleading tone, as they descended the staircase together. "It is such a hideous name, and I do dislike it so."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FIRST BITTER DROP IN NELLY'S CUP.

THE feelings experienced by Mrs Prowse, as she followed Nelly into the luncheon-room, are better imagined than described. The coolness with which her new sister-in-law expressed her wishes and opinions, struck the canon's wife almost speechless with surprise. She had positively nothing to say in answer to such fearless frankness. She had understood from her brother, that his wife was a young girl who had been reared in the utmost seclusion; and had expected, in consequence, to meet a blushing, timid child, who would not dare to think for herself, but be entirely subservient, not only to her husband, but to her husband's sister, looking up to them both, indeed, as to a superior order of beings.

Over such a subject Mrs Prowse would have completely tyrannised; but she would have liked her, after a fashion, all the same. She would have derived such keen satisfaction in arranging all her household affairs for her, from ordering the dinner and scolding the servants, to directing the choice of her acquaintance or her dress—that in sheer gratitude for so much pleasure, she could not but have set some value on the person from whose weakness she derived it.

Had she, on the contrary, discovered she had been deceived with respect to the appearance of her brother's bride, and instead of a mere girl, encountered a woman of her own age and experience, who was resolved to stand up for herself, and rule her house as she chose, Mrs Prowse would have silently acknowledged her right to do so, and shrunk into her proper position of her own accord.

But to find that the mistress of No. 15 was really almost the child she had been described, and yet in full possession of a woman's knowledge of the privileges acquired by her marriage, was too much for the canon's wife. She looked at Nelly's sweet

sunny face (not without a malicious remembrance of her own husband's admiration of it the night before), with its innocent eyes, and artless expression ; at the simplicity of her dress (so much too simple, according to Mrs Prowse's idea, for her brother's wife), and the unstudied grace of her manner ; and contrasting them with the decision of her words and the freedom with which she accepted all the good things bestowed on her with her new name, was fairly puzzled what to think of her. Was this a child, or was it a woman ? Certainly not a woman to increase the weight and respectability of her brother's establishment in Hilstone ; still less a child who would consent to be tutored and trained, turned this way or that, according as the Monktons chose to guide her. And feeling this, Mrs Prowse almost hated Nelly, as, without hesitation she took her seat at the head of the luncheon-table, and motioned her visitor into a chair at the side. She was only doing what she had been accustomed to do, all her life at home, and that was to take the entire management of the establishment : to rule, came easily and naturally to her ; but Mrs Prowse, unaware of the circumstance, mistook the girl's simplicity for audacity, and chose to believe that she assumed the freedom merely in the pride of her new possessions, and for the sake of "showing off." Although it was the last thing she would have acknowledged, Matilda Prowse became jealous, even during that first interview, of Nelly's freshness and beauty ; still more so of her apparent contentment and independence ; and finding that, according to her own creed, she could neither hope to respect nor influence her, she took to hating her instead ; a feeling which is not uncommon between relatives thus violently brought together, and which was religiously fostered in the present instance till the end of the chapter.

Nelly, meanwhile, perfectly unconscious of the thoughts which were then passing through the mind of her sister-in-law, chatted away at the luncheon table as though they were destined to become the best friends in the world.

"Yes ! we went to Paris," she said, in answer to some formal question from Mrs Prowse relative to the wedding tour, "but only for a fortnight ; and to tell you the truth, I grudged even that, for my brother is miserable without me, and so am I without him. We had never been separated before—at least, only once," she added, correcting herself with a blush.

Mrs Prowse noted the blush, and it awakened her curiosity.

"And when may that have been ?" she asked.

"When I went to Orpington Chase, when I first met your brother," replied Nelly, still colouring; but, under the circumstances, the colouring was not out of place, and Mrs Prowse thought no more of it.

"I liked Paris very much," continued Nelly, anxious to change the subject, "but I have been such a rustic all my life, that I have seen nothing, and any place is new to me. Little Bickton is such a tiny village that even Hilstone appears quite a grand town after it."

"*Even Hilstone!*" repeated the canon's wife, not over-pleased with the depreciatory term. "Why, Mrs James, Hilstone is considered one of the finest towns in England, as it is one of the most ancient. It has not its equal anywhere; and in point of advantages it is quite unrivalled."

"Is it?" said innocent Nelly.

"It shows in what a very secluded manner you must have lived to put the question," replied Mrs Prowse, with a thin smile. "Why, our cathedral is perfect; but I suppose you have never even seen a cathedral, so that you will not be able to judge of its merits by comparison."

"Oh! yes, I have," said Nelly, eagerly; "I saw Notre Dame in Paris, besides several beautiful churches and abbeys. In fact, I think James took me to everything worth seeing; but I was very glad to get home again. It was all bustle and confusion, and I was longing for Bertie and Little Bickton, and so we spent the last week there. I cannot be happy away from him."

"Your brother appears to have been a great charge to you," observed Mrs Prowse.

"A very welcome charge, excepting for his own sake, Mrs Prowse. I could not let any one look after him except myself. Our old Nurse Aggie and I have waited on him ever since he was born."

"But surely that cannot last for ever," exclaimed the doctor's sister, determined to learn the truth respecting Robert Brooke. "It has been all very well hitherto, Mrs James, I daresay, but now that you are married, you will have other duties to fulfil besides waiting on an invalid."

"Never any that will prevent my looking after Bertie, Mrs Prowse," was the energetic answer, "or I am afraid they will run a chance of being neglected. Why, he is my own twin brother, you know; there were only seven minutes between our births, and it is so sad to think that he should have been afflicted, and I

escaped without anything;" and Nelly's eyes moistened, as they generally did when she mentioned her brother's deformity.

"But what will Mr Brooke do when he returns to the country, Mrs James?" pertinaciously demanded her listener. "He will be forced to resign your attentions then; he cannot expect to keep you always by his side."

At this question Nelly was so astonished that she laid down her knife and fork.

"To the country, Mrs Prowse,—to what country?"

"To Little Bibbling, or whatever you call the place you come from. Your brother has property there, has he not? a house and grounds, or something of the sort."

At this suggestion the bride, to the indignation of the canon's wife, burst into a most indecorous laugh.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs Prowse," exclaimed the offender, as soon as she could speak, "but I cannot help laughing at the idea of Bertie with a house and grounds. What would he do with it, poor darling, if I were not there to order it for him? It is quite a mistake, I assure you—we have nothing—and never had, except the lease of grandpapa's cottage, which we disposed of. And even were it the case, Bertie would never leave me for Little Bickton or any place. I would never have married, if our separation had been the consequence; we could not live without each other."

At this speech, which so evidently betokened what were at least the bride's intentions with respect to the length of her brother's visit, Mrs Prowse waxed very wroth, and she was just about to say something cutting relative to the strangeness of such a proceeding, and the talk it would create in Hilstone, when her good intentions were frustrated by the appearance of Dr Monkton.

He entered the room with a furtive glance, as though he almost hoped that his sister might either have not yet arrived, or taken her departure again; but on perceiving her stiffly sitting by his young wife's side, he very properly assumed a look of gratification, and hastened to greet her. The Monktons were not a demonstrative couple, at all events towards each other, and Nelly, who so ardently loved her brother, was astonished to see the formal salute which, after more than a month's separation, passed between the doctor and Mrs Prowse. She would have given Bertie double as much after the absence of an hour, or after no absence at all, but for the pleasure of expending some of the affection upon him with which her warm heart was overflowing.

Yet after Dr Monkton had thus calmly greeted his sister, he passed on to his wife and kissed her warmly ; and although Nelly did not know what it was to be placed in such a position, she instinctively felt that this was what she could never have done, and left the other undone.

She shrunk from the kiss so publicly given, and coloured as sensitively as though it were something wrong. Mrs Prowse, noticing both the action and its result, sneered at her brother's infatuation, whilst she gave Nelly credit for being "absurdly affected, considering the open way in which she had gone on with Mr Brooke up-stairs."

Dr Monkton sat down to the luncheon table and commenced to talk volubly ; but he did not appear at his ease, and every minute his dark eyes roved from his sister's face to that of his wife, as if he could discern what the women thought of one another.

Nelly was as calm and collected as usual, but there was a nervous manner about Mrs Prowse, as if she burned to disclose some hidden wrong, which did not tend to reassure her brother, and he spoke of anything and everything rather than give her an opportunity of doing the same. But in the midst of one of his descriptions of Paris, there was heard a melancholy howl.

"Why, what's the matter with Thug, Helena?" he said, addressing his wife. He always called her by her full name, and she was glad (although she scarcely knew why) that he did so.

"He smells the luncheon, I suppose, and is impatient," she replied. "I shut him up in the bedroom, because Mrs Prowse is afraid of him."

"Afraid!" echoed the doctor ; "why, how long is it since you have become afraid of dogs, Matilda?"

"I do not know that I am exactly *afraid* of him," replied that lady, "but I certainly object to sit in the same room with an animal who appears to me more fit for a stable than a house. You know, James, that I never liked to see dogs, even small ones, about the sitting-rooms, and consider that nobody with cleanly habits would approve of it ; but I never saw such a huge brute as this admitted there before. I should as soon think of keeping a donkey in my drawing-room, myself."

"Thug is certainly a good size for a lady's lap-dog," remarked the doctor, laughing, "and is fitter, as you say, for a kennel than a sofa, but he is a great pet of Helena's ; so we mustn't say anything against him here."

Nelly's colour had been rapidly coming and going during this discussion, and she only waited till the last word was out of her husband's mouth, before she eagerly interposed her claim to a hearing.

"I know, properly speaking, that he is not a dog for the house, James, but he has always been in it, ever since I first had him; and he is as gentle with those he knows as the tiniest spaniel could be. He sleeps on the mat outside my bedroom door," she continued, addressing herself to Mrs Prowse, "and you would not know that there was anything there, he is so quiet. And he has never been tied up ever since he was born: we tried it once, and he fretted so dreadfully that he got quite thin. He howled the whole time, and refused to eat his food."

"He would soon get over that," said Dr Monkton, as if it were a matter of little consequence whether he did or no.

"Oh! but I am sure he wouldn't," exclaimed Nelly, with a look of distress, as a vague fear of some future opposition with respect to her favourite flitted across her mind. "He is so very fond of Bertie and me. He would be miserable if you took him away from us. So it is no use talking of it, James, for I won't even hear of such a thing."

They had not been married more than a month then, and he smiled at her earnestness, and said she was a little goose and wanted to spoil the dog as much as she was spoilt herself; and so for the present her heart was reassured, notwithstanding that Mrs Prowse turned down the corners of her mouth at the display of so much weak folly on the part of her brother.

As soon as the meal was concluded, Nelly jumped up and said she must go to Bertie, as she had promised to accompany him whether he sat in the garden or was wheeled out for a drive.

"Tell him the garden will be best," shouted the doctor, as she left the room, "at all events till after dinner. It is too hot for you to be out until the sun has gone down, Helena."

When she had disappeared he turned to his sister, and, as though making up his mind to something disagreeable, asked abruptly—

"Well, have I said too much or too little, Matilda? what do you think of her?"

"I've thought very little either one way or another," replied Mrs Prowse in the most disheartening and unpleasant tone. "I have been too busy listening to all she has to say. She seems to be a great talker."

"It is the vivacity of youth," observed the doctor, "and the result perhaps to-day of having a little nervousness to conceal. I have not found Helena very talkative since our marriage."

"Oh! I shouldn't say she was *nervous*. That is the last thing I should ascribe to her," tittered Mrs Prowse. "But with regard to this brother, James! how long do you expect him to stop with you?"

"At this question Dr Monkton positively coloured. It was the one which he had dreaded most; which he knew sooner or later he should have to answer; and for which he should incur most blame. He had not expected it to be put quite so early; but it would be all the same in the end. Yet, the answer to it was not one to be given in public, and the servants were already clearing the luncheon table.

"I should like to speak with you about that and several other matters, Matilda," he replied. "Suppose we go into the garden for a while. You have your parasol, and we shall not find it too warm beneath the trees."

So they passed out of the French windows on to the terrace, which, although not long, was broad and well-sheltered, and paced up and down beneath its foliage, conversing together.

"The fact is," observed Dr Monkton, in reference to his sister's query, "it is quite impossible for me to say for how long Robert Brooke may or may not remain here. You see the case is rather a peculiar one. They are orphans without a home, and they are twins who have never been separated, and all this, added to the boy's infirm condition, renders any proposal for their living apart rather difficult of suggestion. In short," he continued, "it was an understood thing, that if Helena married me, her brother was to accompany us to Hilstone. They are very much attached to one another, as you can see, and I first won her regard by the attention I paid her brother, and so for the present the matter must rest there."

"But for a permanency," exclaimed Mrs Prowse, "to have him here always; whether you have a family or whether you have not; to have that young man a fixture in your house, and occupying the best bedroom too, will be most inconvenient; and I must add, most unprecedented."

They were walking up and down, up and down, beneath the windows of the two dressing-rooms which stood on the first landing, and overlooked the garden.

"I said, Matilda, that for the *present* the matter must rest

there," repeated Dr Monkton, with some emphasis on the words he wished to impress upon his sister, "but whether Robert Brooke remains with us or not will entirely depend upon his future conduct—and my wishes."

Upon leaving the dining-room, Nelly had run up to Bertie, as she intended doing, but finding that he was not quite ready to go out into the garden, had waited his royal pleasure. To beguile the time she leaned out of the dressing-room window, about which twined clusters of the noisette rose; and on seeing her husband approach, had plucked a blossom with the childish intention of throwing it on him as he passed. But as he came within reach, he spoke the words above recorded, and she guessed their import at once. Sick with the impression which they conveyed, Nelly leaned back against the window-sill, whilst as their meaning fully sunk into her mind, large tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

It was the first time she had ever had the slightest doubt, the faintest notion, that her brother's residence with her was not to be a permanent one; permanent—beyond the possibility of a change. She did not fear—she could not as yet entertain a fear that her husband's words meant more than that, if it was agreeable to all parties, they were not bound to keep by one another; but the possibility of such a contingency was sufficient to make her wretched.

It was the first note of distrust which she had heard sounded in her married life; the first taste of the bitter cup which she was afterwards called upon to swallow.

Bertie did not see her thus, but old Aggie did, and, as usual, was vehement in her anxiety to know what had happened to affect her young mistress. For the nurse had already heard sufficient at the kitchen table, about the doctor's sister, to make her suspect that her visit had had something to do with Nelly's tears.

"Now, nurse, it is really nothing of any consequence," said Nelly, in answer to the old woman's reiterated entreaties that she would confess; "it is all my own stupidity. I overheard something which worried me a little, and that is positively all. Remember, I have been married for a whole month last Saturday, and I have never cried once, from that day to this, so it was not to be expected that I could go on like that for ever. Fancy *me!* whom you have so often called your 'cry baby,' going for a whole month without one tear! Why, I wanted something by this time

to freshen me up. And it's all over now ; Aggie, so do trot along, and get Bertie to come into the garden, or—or—perhaps I may begin again ! ”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHAT THE TWINS THOUGHT OF THEIR NEW HOME.

NELLY was perfectly correct in affirming that the first month of her wedded life had been spent without shedding a single tear. When she had once made up her mind that for Bertie's sake as well as for her own, she would be wrong to refuse Dr Monkton's proposal ; or rather, when she had once given him her hand in the parish church of Little Bickton, she had found the sacrifice not so great as she expected. For although there have certainly been cases in which wretched girls, frightened or persuaded into unions the mere thought of which they detested, have been dragged half fainting to the altar, they are the exceptions, not the rule ; and their heroines have not been women of the same order of mind as Nelly Brooke. Far oftener, in this world (if not in that of romance), have marriages which ended in the depths of despair and shame, commenced with a very fair promise of domestic happiness. We have but to search the records of the Divorce Court to prove this truth. There are few English maidens who will be forced into marriage against their will ; few English men who would care to accept a hand thus reluctantly given. But there are hundreds, ay, thousands, of maidens, who listen to the voice of the first tempter who presents himself, and refuse to be undeceived as to his personal merits ; and thousands of men who persist in marrying for the sake of a pretty face alone. And these are the unions which so often end in misery instead of happiness.

If Nelly Brooke had positively disliked Dr Monkton, she would not have married him, even to save her brother's life. She was too pure and upright for that ; she would rather have watched Bertie die, and died herself for grief afterwards. But she was dazzled by the many advantages which the marriage offered her ; she was bewildered by the advice and persuasions of her friends—coming from such various quarters, and yet all tending to the same end—and she was puzzled with regard to her own feelings respecting her lover.

She could not help acknowledging that he was exceedingly kind and pleasant, and well-looking ; and she kept on asking

herself where she could find fault with him and what she required more ; and because no settled answer came from her heart, and her objections seemed vague and undefined, she concluded that she must be too exacting, and that in her ignorance she required more than any woman had a right to expect or receive. She felt that something urged her against the marriage, but yet she could not give that something any name ; it was a shadowy and intangible feeling which might simply be the result of contemplating so great a change in her life, and shared in common with every girl under the same circumstances. And then had been thrown into the scale Mrs Weston's arguments and Mr Ray's advice ; and, to crown all, that dreadful, never-to-be-forgotten fall of Bertie's, and thereupon the balance had turned ; and Nelly yielded. But she yielded of her own free will—if a will that had been thus tampered with can be called “free”—at all events, she did not consent to marry Dr Monkton until she believed that it was the right thing for her to do. She was not a lamb dragged to the sacrifice ; she was a lamb who saw with the eyes of him whom she most loved ; and thought that to view him happy and contented would be sufficient reward to her for any amount of self-denial.

This remembrance did not make her after-burthen any less weighty to bear ; on the contrary, it increased the load. The wretchedness which others bring upon us is at least entitled to the consolation of self-pity, but the trouble entailed by our own blindness or wilfulness has no right to such a plea ; and all we can do is to curse our folly, and suffer in silence.

But Nelly had not yet arrived at cursing—she had not even had an idea of regretting the step she had taken : on the contrary, she had more than once congratulated herself that she had followed the advice of her friends. All had been so very bright and pleasant since her wedding-day. Dr Monkton has already been described as a passionate and pleasure-seeking man, who had fallen in love with Nelly Brooke for no better reason than the freshness of her face and manners. So long, therefore, as he remained unsatiated with these attractions, he would be sure to treat her kindly, and during the month that they had been left to each other's society, and he had been subjected to no influence but hers, nothing had occurred to check their happiness, nor to rouse the temper of which she had not yet seen a specimen. His young wife had proved all that he could desire ; she had soon lost her shy reserve, and the artless wonder she expressed at all she saw, and the frank comments she passed upon it, had served to amuse

and interest him ; whilst if she did not yet readily respond to his affection, she had at least learned to listen to its protestations without impatience, and to bear its signs without shrinking. And in return for her forbearance James Monkton had lavished such gifts upon his bride as Nelly had not only never received, but never dreamed of in her life before. Articles of dress, of jewellery, and such knick-knacks as girls delight in, were, during her sojourn in Paris, showered upon her daily ; whilst every evening her husband would take her to some fresh place of entertainment where he would derive his whole pleasure from merely watching the varied expressions of childish delight and surprise which, one after another, flitted across her open face.

Nelly had lived a fairy life in Paris, until she had almost begun to believe that hers must be the acme of wedded happiness. She had been so little used, poor child, to receiving any attention, or exciting any admiration, that it is not to be wondered at if her husband's warm rhapsodies upon her beauty, and his anxiety to give her pleasure, or to lavish gifts upon her, appeared, in her unsophisticated ignorance, to be the very height of devotion. She had yet to learn that men can love unto death who have never dared so much as to offer a flower to the object of their affection, nor to breathe a word into her ear which related to themselves.

But, after a while, notwithstanding her pleasures and her presents, Nelly began to pine for Bertie. She longed to tell him of her unexpected content, and to show him her store of treasures, many of which had been selected for himself ; above all, to see his face again, to hear his voice, and hold his hand in hers. Her love for her twin was not only faithful, it was so sympathetic that it was physically impossible that she should be long at rest without him. Dr Monkton did not entirely believe in the strange sympathy said to exist between some twin-children ; he only attributed his wife's anxiety to rejoin her brother, to the fact that they had been so accustomed to live together, that she missed him as she would have missed any other familiar thing, and as she would have done if there had been seven years between their births, instead of seven minutes.

But he was not in the mood to ridicule her attachment for Bertie, or even to dispute its source ; and when Nelly began to lose her interest in the sights of Paris, and to sigh for the time when she should meet her brother again, he offered to take her home at once.

Robert Brooke, delighted at his sister's compliance, and the

marriage by which it had been so shortly followed (for there had only been a month between the engagement and the wedding), had consented to be left until their return under the charge of old Aggie and Mr Ray, and had removed to the vicarage as soon as the bride and bridegroom had left Little Bickton. Thence Nelly had almost daily received letters from him, which sometimes detailed the kindness he was experiencing at the hands of the vicar's family, but oftener enlarged on the pleasure which he felt in the prospect of seeing them again, and the day when he should for ever exchange Little Bickton for a residence in Hilstone. These letters had afforded Nelly intense gratification, and reconciled her to remaining in Paris as long as she had done; for, contrary to his usual moods, everything was rose-coloured now to Robert Brooke, and in his delight at her marriage, and the future before them, she received the first instalment of the payment of the debt he owed her. The original plan had been that Dr and Mrs Monkton should go straight from Paris to Hilstone, and that Robert Brooke, with old Aggie and Thug, should join them there; but when her husband proposed to take her back to Little Bickton for a week before they entered their new home, Nelly gladly consented.

To see Mrs Weston again, and little Tommy Dobbs, and the Rays, seemed almost as if she had never been married at all; and during the few days she remained in her old quarters, Nelly's spirits were so high, and her excitement so unbounded, that her friends congratulated themselves on the wisdom they had displayed in advising her to act as she had done; and her brother was more than ever convinced that both their fortunes were made. And next, they had all returned to Hilstone together: and this brings the narrative of their lives down to the moment when Nelly overheard the words which her husband used concerning Bertie, and suddenly woke up from her brief dream of contentment to remember that nothing is certain in this world—nothing, indeed, except that once married we cannot with credit or ease unmarried ourselves again!

It was a shock, but only a passing one; for her husband's manner towards her was unaltered, and the young and flattered are too much engrossed in the present to permit a visionary future to disturb them overmuch. Besides, Nelly's fears—if Dr Monkton's remark had left any behind it—were too vague not to be dispelled by the cordiality with which the brothers-in-law behaved to one another, and the good understanding which seemed

to exist between them. With Robert Brooke the doctor was infallible; he quoted him constantly, and referred to him on every occasion; seeming to think there could be no end to his generosity, or limit to their friendship. He called him by his Christian name whenever he wished to mention him, whilst he was "Bertie," and nothing else, with Dr Monkton; and Nelly was charmed to think how soon the two men had adopted one another as relations.

Mrs Prowse took her departure before the dinner-hour, and (not over-pleased apparently with her first visit) did not reappear during the whole of the succeeding day; and the intervening time, which was passed by the brother and sister in examining the comforts and conveniences of their new abode, and summing up its luxuries, was one of unalloyed content.

Nelly flew from one chamber to another; now exclaiming with delight at the beauty of a picture, or calling to Bertie to come and try the ease of a spring-cushioned chair; anon bending enchanted over the stands of hot-house flowers which adorned the sitting-rooms, or busily engaged in examining the books of engravings which stood on the shelves of the doctor's library.

Every article of furniture in Dr Monkton's house was of the best—every ornament in good taste, and it contained much to be admired even by those that were accustomed to such luxuries; but to these young people, who had been used to the mere necessities of life, and not always to them, it was like an enchanted palace of delight! There was a seat on poles, in which Bertie might be carried up and down stairs whenever he felt too lazy to walk; and there was a wheeled chair always awaiting his pleasure in the hall, in which he could either sit at the table or be taken out into the garden. And he had a spring mattress on his bed, which he declared had afforded him better nights than he had ever passed in his life before, and a soft couch with piles of cushions in his little sitting-room, and a bell close at hand, which rang right into old Aggie's ears, and would summon her to his side in a moment.

Added to which, Dr Monkton had informed him that the footman was always to be at his service, from luncheon till dinner-time, and after dinner for as long as he chose to employ him; so that, with his invalid chair, he was to make himself quite independent of the other inmates of the house, and to go just where he listed. And Bertie was so pleased at this latter intimation, that Nelly had not the heart to put a check on his delight, even by express-

ing a hope that he would not often wish so to absent himself. It was happiness to her only to watch his face as he dilated on the kindness with which the doctor had made all these arrangements for his comfort, or to hear the tone of his voice as he contrasted their present life with the one they had left in the dull past behind them.

"And he says, Nell," he remarked gaily, in allusion to some conversation which had passed between himself and his brother-in-law, "that as soon as ever the people of the place have called upon you—which they are all sure to do before long—you will have more invitations to parties than you will care to accept. And then you will be obliged to give them some dinners in return, and you will sit at the head of your table looking so pretty and jolly, and with every one paying you compliments and saying what a darling you are—and I shall be so proud of my sister. I shall never go down, you know, when you have company. I shouldn't care about it if I were well, and in my present state it would be out of the question. But I shall hear almost all about it from you, and fancy the rest for myself; and you must run up once in the evening, or so, just to take a peep at me, and let me see how handsome you can look in an evening dress. My dearest Nell! I am so glad to think that you are in your proper position at last."

But Nelly looked more perplexed than pleased at the prospect of giving dinner-parties.

"I daresay it will come naturally to me after a few times," she said, "but I hope it won't be necessary to give any for a long while, Bertie. You know I have never done anything of the kind before, and I am sure at first that I shan't know in the least what to do or say."

"What nonsense!" laughed Bertie. "All you'll have to do is to put on your most becoming dress, and look as pretty as you can. What a blessing it is that you've married a rich man who can afford to pay servants to arrange all such things for you. O Nelly! what a curse poverty is! I wonder we can have borne it so long, that it has not killed us both before now."

Nelly sighed and looked grave.

"There are worse curses than poverty, darling, though happily neither you nor I have known them. But if I could not appreciate the value of all this comfort for my own sake, Bertie, I should do so for yours. It is positive bliss to see you so happy. I hardly know you for the same brother that I had at Little Bickton.

What a little time"—and she might have added, "what a little *thing*"—"to work such great changes; but I am very thankful that it is so."

What Nelly said was true. A stranger who had only seen Robert Brooke in his discontent at Little Bickton, would scarcely have recognised him as he appeared in Hilstone. His face, which then had never changed its fretful and moody expression for anything brighter than the sickly look of gratitude with which he would occasionally reward his sister's efforts for his comfort, was now irradiated with smiles; and his voice, the weariful cadence of which used to go to her heart, had regained much of its boyish tone, and was becoming cheerful like her own. His sister's marriage and his change of residence seemed to have put new life into him; he appeared to have lost that painful sense of his deformity which erst-while had made him shrink from any encounter with his kind: and was eager to go out and see everything there was to be seen in Hilstone. He had ceased to grumble too at the hardness of his lot; but would speak with hope and cheerfulness of the future, as though he believed there might be happiness contained in it for him as well as for other men.

Had her husband never shown her any individual kindness or attention, Nelly must still have been grateful to him for the mighty change which he had worked in her brother's mind.

She lived in Bertie's life, and as James Monkton treated one, so would he save or destroy the other.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW IS HIGHLY OFFENDED.

"I HAVE good news for you, Helena," said Dr Monkton, about a week after their arrival in Hilstone, as they sat together at the breakfast-table.

"What is that?"

"I am summoned to a consultation in London, which will certainly detain me till the evening; and perhaps over the night."

"And why should that be good news, James?" she inquired.

"Because the carriage will be at your service for the whole of the day, and you can take Bertie over to Coombe Wood, or Stackley Abbey; or any of the places about here, which I have described to you."

"Oh! that will be charming," exclaimed Nelly, as the vision

of a whole day spent in driving about the beautiful country with her brother, rose up before her; and then she added with a degree of compunction, "but I wish you could go also, James."

"You must learn to be thankful for small mercies, Helena! If I were here, and able to go with you, that would be the very reason that you could not go yourself. You don't know yet what it is to be a doctor's wife. However, take my advice, and enjoy yourself when you can, for it is not often that you will get such an opportunity."

And shortly afterwards he rose, and bidding her farewell, proceeded to the railway station, whilst she flew up to Bertie's room to consult him with respect to the intended expedition.

They had been so equally unused to anything like novelty or pleasure, that the anticipation excited him almost as much as herself, and after a brief colloquy, it was agreed that they should partake of an early dinner, "in the dear old way, you know, Bertie!" and drive out to Coombe Wood afterwards, where the coachman was to put up his horses, and allow them a couple of hours, or so, for wandering about the beautiful place of which they had heard so much.

"And we will take my large plaid, and your air cushions, Bertie," exclaimed Nelly, her face rosy with excitement, "so that you can sit down if you feel in the least bit tired, and we will walk very, very slowly, just loiter about, in fact, and look for all the wild flowers which, James says, grow there; and if we stay late enough, perhaps we may hear the nightingales. There were no nightingales in dear old Bickton, were there, darling? at least I never heard any, but James says there are hundreds in Coombe Wood, and that they sing so beautifully directly the sun goes down. But now I must run down and speak to cook about the dinner, or we shall not have it in time."

The servants, who had already taken a great fancy to their girlish mistress, at once became eager to assist in her plan, and the cook proposed that she should pack up a basket of good things to put in the carriage, that, if so inclined, the brother and sister might take their evening meal in the wood.

"Oh, yes! do, cook," replied Mrs James Monkton, clapping her hands in the most undignified manner. "And now, if I could only manage to persuade my dear old Thug to go too, it would be a perfect party."

Here the footman, who had been listening from his pantry, ventured to suggest that the mastiff and himself were already such

good friends, that if he were on the box, he felt confident that the dog would follow the carriage.

"No doubt he would, John," replied his mistress, "with you on the box, and me inside. Oh! we certainly must try it. Thug should learn to follow the horses."

"I can keep on a-whistling to him, ma'am; and if he shouldn't quite understand at first, 'twill be easy to jump down and coax him on a bit."

"To be sure," cried Nelly, to whom, in her present state of excitement, it would almost have appeared easy to drag the carriage to Coombe Wood herself, "and I can put my head out of the window too, and call him; and so between your whistling, John, and my calling, I think it will be very strange if he prefers to stay behind;" and with a laugh still upon her tongue, Nelly ran up the kitchen-stairs into the hall, and almost into the arms of prim Mrs Prowse, who, accompanied by a sly-looking lady with mock-modest eyes, had entered the house in her usual familiar manner. Nelly had been running and talking so fast that she was rather flushed and out of breath, and struck her sister-in-law as looking more like a school-girl fresh from a game of romps, than the mistress of a household, from the important duty of giving directions to her servants.

"Oh! how do you do?" exclaimed Nelly, carelessly, with a broad smile upon her face; "I am *so* busy! we are going over to Coombe Wood directly after dinner;" and then she had time to glance towards the stranger, as though demanding an introduction.

"I am quite well, I thank you, Mrs James," returned Mrs Prowse, with a severe propriety, intended to discountenance the other's frivolity, "and have just stepped over with Fanny Clewson—this is she;" intimating her companion by a movement of her head; "every one in Hilstone knows Fanny Clewson—to tell you that I have just heard that Mrs Filmer intends calling upon you this afternoon, so I thought it best that you should be prepared."

Nelly thought the mere statement that every one in Hilstone knew Miss Clewson was a strange mode of introducing her to one who did not; but as the lady herself appeared to take it as a matter of course; and not to be in the least offended, she only bowed in return for her deep curtesy; and then answered Mrs Prowse's announcement with the irreverent inquiry—

"Mrs Filmer!—who is Mrs Filmer?"

Miss Clewson looked at Mrs Prowse, and Mrs Prowse looked

at Miss Clewson, and for a moment neither of them seemed able to speak for surprise.

"My dear Mrs Monkton!" at last drawled the unmarried lady in a voice of incredulity.

"Your ignorance must be affected," now put in the canon's wife. "Surely my brother James has told you of Mrs Filmer; the *daughter-in-law* of the Dean of Hilstone; *mistress* of the deanery at the present moment; and *mother* of Captain Herbert and Miss Laura Filmer!"

"No, indeed he has not!" replied Nelly, laughing at the comical look of consternation which her sister-in-law's face had assumed; "or if he has, I have forgotten all about her, which comes to the same thing. But pray don't stand here; let us go into the drawing-room, and then you can enlighten my darkness," and she led the way as she proposed. But Mrs Prowse was not to be appeased by Nelly's cheery tone. Levity on such a subject became sacrilege, which, as a staunch upholder of the ecclesiastical party and all its members, it was her faithful duty to put down.

"I have nothing more to say upon the matter, Mrs James," she gravely remarked, as they seated themselves, "and am only surprised to find that you need any information on what so greatly concerns us all. Mrs Filmer is *the* lady of Hilstone; she 'leads' the town; and all those whom she has hitherto honoured with her acquaintance have been only too grateful for her notice. She has a great regard for myself, and also for my brother James, in consequence of which, and with the evident desire to show *us* attention, she has been good enough, thus early, to signify that she will call upon you. She will be here this afternoon. Having no wish to ruffle or discompose you, she has been so kind as to prepare you for her visit, by sending an intimation of it through myself. I am not sure at what hour she will be here, but of course you will hold yourself in readiness to receive her directly she arrives. And I wish, Mrs James," continued Mrs Prowse, becoming more confidential, "I hope that you will put on a silk dress for the occasion. These muslins and prints are all very well for the morning, but they are not suitable to a visit of ceremony—and I observed the other day that you wore one all the afternoon—Mrs Filmer knows that you come from the country, and will be ready, I am sure, to make every allowance; but still, I think it right to tell you these things, else people may suspect that you have not been used to

any society, and in a place like Hilstone, we cannot be too particular."

Nelly's disposition was naturally forbearing, but her spirit rebelled at the tone of dictation and patronage which Mrs Prowse had taken up, and which was doubly irritating before a third party. She thought of the proposed scheme of pleasure being abandoned, and could not see the necessity of disappointing both Bertie and herself for the convenience of a stranger. So that her answer had more decision in it than in her new position she had yet dared to express.

"I do not think that it will signify much to Mrs Filmer whether I put on a silk dress or a muslin one to-day: for, as I told you at first, Bertie and I are going to Coombe Wood this afternoon, and shall most likely have started before Mrs Filmer arrives."

"But you must put off going; you must defer your expedition, Mrs James!" exclaimed Mrs Prowse, horrified at the light manner in which the bride spoke of missing the promised visit. "Mrs Filmer sent over Fanny Clewson to inform me of her intention, simply that I might prepare you for receiving her, and you talk of going out for a drive instead. I never heard of such a thing! Mrs Filmer would be deeply offended at such an unwarrantable slight — she might never call on you again."

"But surely," argued Nelly, "Mrs Filmer can never have expected that I should put off all other engagements only just to see her. Bertie and I have made all our arrangements for passing the afternoon in Coombe Wood, and I can't put it off for any one, because he would be very much disappointed, and so should I; we are going to dine early on purpose. If Mrs Filmer comes before we start I shall be very pleased to see her—if she's nice—else, any other day will do as well, I suppose."

"Where is my brother James?" exclaimed the canon's spouse, looking about the room in a vague manner, as if she was faint and wanted more air. "I *must* speak to him. He will never allow this."

"He is gone to London for the day," returned Nelly, quietly, "and may not be back until to-morrow morning. It was he who proposed our going to Coombe Wood; and told us to be sure and make the best use of our time, for we might not have such another opportunity."

"But he did not know that *Mrs Filmer* was coming to call

upon you," panted Mrs Prowse; "he would be the first to desire you to make *any* engagement succumb to this."

"Would he really, do you think?" asked Nelly, reflectively; and then she turned suddenly to Mrs Prowse, and said: "Well, look here then. I will put off starting for an hour later—that will not be until four—and if you see Mrs Filmer, you can just ask her to come before then."

Ask Mrs Filmer—who, in her coarse patronage, was accustomed to outrage all etiquette with regard to visiting her humbler neighbours—to pay her respects to the doctor's little bride before a certain hour, or not at all. The mere idea of taking such a liberty was enough to petrify Mrs Prowse. She rose from the sofa whereon she had been seated, and, followed by Fanny Clewson, prepared to quit the room.

"Very well, Mrs James, I have warned you, remember," she said, indignantly, "and now I must beg to wash my hands of the whole affair. *Mrs Filmer is coming to call on you this afternoon.* I have delivered the message with which I was intrusted to you, and I have pointed out the necessity of your attending to it. My brother James being unfortunately absent, I can do no more, but must leave you to act as you think proper," and she swept out of the door as she spoke.

"Oh! I am *sure* Mrs Monkton will do just as you wish, dear Mrs Prowse," murmured, more than said, Miss Fanny Clewson, looking at Nelly from beneath her drooping eye-lashes, as she wriggled after her friend. This species of address was still more impertinent, in Nelly's ideas, than the former had been; she dropped the hand she was about to offer Miss Clewson at parting, and merely bowed to her instead.

"I understand perfectly, Mrs Prowse," she said, as she stood on the doorstep and witnessed the departure of her visitors, "Mrs Filmer is coming here this afternoon, and if I should be at home at the time, I shall be very happy to receive her. I have put off my engagement for an hour, solely on her account, and I think she could hardly expect me to do more."

Mrs Prowse and Miss Clewson left her without further parley, and Nelly returned into the hall. As she did so, she felt very discomposed at what had just passed. She knew that she was young, and ignorant of the ways of society, and had only been used to country life; but that was no reason, she silently argued, that Mrs Prowse should treat her as if she were a child, to be ordered about and dictated to. She had already seen enough of

her sister-in-law to make her sincerely regret there was any connexion between them, but since that misfortune could not now be remedied, she had no inclination to be made to submit to an authority so unlawfully exercised. Nelly had always been mistress in her grandfather's house, and interference from strangers was a thing she had not been used to, and could not brook. She was a lamb, it is true, but only according to whose hand pulled the reins that checked her. She could be a very spirited lamb when occasion demanded, and this was an occasion which seemed to call up her most rebellious feelings. She did not tell Bertie of the interview she had had with Mrs Prowse. She feared it might vex him, and she was accustomed to shield him from little annoyances by keeping them to herself. So she made no alteration in their plans, except that when four o'clock struck without any sign of Mrs Filmer's approach, her natural good-nature and wish to oblige caused her to loiter about for half-an-hour longer in hopes of seeing her expected guests before she started.

But at the end of that period Bertie grew impatient, declaring the best part of the day was already gone, and they should have no time at all in the wood at that rate.

"What on earth are you waiting for, Nelly?" he asked, rather fretfully, "the carriage must have been at the door for an hour."

"Not quite so long as that, Bertie, but we will keep the horses standing no longer. I expected some ladies to call here this afternoon, but perhaps they have changed their minds about coming; so let us start."

She slipped her brother's arm through her own as she spoke, and led him into the hall, but just as Long had thrown open the front door, and signified to the coachman that they were ready, their own carriage was forced to move on to make way for that of the dean; from which, with a vast amount of pomp and banging of steps, alighted the high and mighty Mrs Filmer. She was followed by her daughter and Mrs Prowse (whom she had ordered to accompany her), and was just in time to meet the brother and sister on the threshold of the doctor's house.

It was an unfortunate encounter, and all the more so because Nelly, with Bertie hanging on her arm, was powerless to do more than smile and half bow in acknowledgment of the presence of her visitors.

Mrs Filmer, rustling in a plum-coloured brocade, just glanced at the girl in her simple robe and bonnet, and then without the

least suspicion that this was the bride she had come in state to visit, was about to pass on without further notice, when Mrs Prowse ventured to touch her elbow.

"Mrs James Monkton," she said, as she indicated Nelly with her eyes, and gave a frown of displeasure at her homely appearance.

"Who?—what, *that*?" rudely exclaimed the lady of the deanery, as she turned completely round to stare at poor Nelly. "Didn't you tell her I was coming?"

Mrs Prowse was about to make some abject apology, when her sister-in-law, perceiving the awkwardness of the situation, came to the rescue. Addressing herself to Mrs Filmer, she said—

"I have much pleasure in seeing you. If you will kindly allow me to put my brother in the carriage I will return to you at once. Mrs Prowse! will you take these ladies into the drawing-room?" And she passed on with Bertie, whilst Mrs and Miss Filmer, followed by their jackal, were compelled to do as she desired them.

"Well! this is most extraordinary behaviour," said the female dignitary, as she ensconced herself upon the sofa. "Can you tell me the reason of this, Matilda? Did you inform the young woman that I was going to call on her this afternoon?"

"I did, indeed, Mrs Filmer," replied the hapless jackal, who, pert and snappish with every one else, was always abjectly humble before the dean's daughter-in-law; "I did indeed, most particularly, and quite fancied that she understood my wishes; but"—

"I said, mamma, that you had better wait till to-morrow," exclaimed Miss Laura Filmer, who was arranging her bonnet-strings at the glass over the mantelpiece; "but you would come to-day. Mrs Prowse said Mrs Monkton had some previous engagement."

"But she should have put it off," interposed the canon's wife; "I fully thought she had put it off—everything should have deferred to your mamma's goodness!"

"Of course she should have put it off!" echoed the dean's daughter-in-law. At this moment the subject of their argument entered the room.

"I am afraid we are detaining you, Mrs Monkton," continued Mrs Filmer, with frigid politeness—"you were going out."

The girl was too truthful to deny the fact.

"I can easily wait a few minutes," she said, with a quiet smile; "the days are so long now, that time is not of so much consequence."

"It's a pity such a mistake was not prevented, though," returned her visitor. "I told Matilda Prowse, here, to let you know in good time, that I was coming this afternoon; but I suppose she delayed till 'twas too late to alter your plans."

To this accusation Mrs Prowse attempted a piteous denial; but though Nelly had little sympathy with either her feelings or herself, she could not hear her wronged without refuting it, and her eager reply came first.

"Oh, no! indeed, Mrs Filmer—you are quite mistaken. Mrs Prowse was over here directly after breakfast, to tell me of your intention, and had it not been for her doing so, we should have started more than an hour ago. But the fact is, Dr Monkton has gone to London for the day, and left us the carriage, and we are anxious to make the best use of such an opportunity by exploring Coombe Wood, of which we have heard a great deal. If it had been only for myself, I should not have minded so much, perhaps, giving it up, but my brother had set his heart upon going, and I could not have him disappointed."

At this avowal, Laura Filmer looked round, interested, but her mother, unaccustomed to such candour, tossed her head with indignation at the "young woman's" presumption.

"A most unusual attention to a brother," she said, as though doubting the truth of Nelly's statement. "There are few young women, Mrs Monkton, who are so ready to sacrifice their own interests for their relatives."

"But I assure you I am sacrificing nothing," replied Nelly, laughing, and thinking that Mrs Filmer alluded to some self-denial on her part. "I love driving about quite as much as Bertie does; and I'd rather be with him than with any one in the world."

At this additional piece of boldness, the august mistress of the deanery was too affronted to make any reply; Mrs Prowse looked at the offender, as if she wondered that the earth did not open and swallow her where she sat; and even Laura Filmer, who could not help feeling interested in the sweet girlish face and figure before them, seemed to think it would be advisable to create a diversion by starting another subject of conversation.

"I suppose you will join the Choral Society, Mrs Monkton. Every lady of any standing in Hilstone belongs to it."

"I have not heard of it," said Nelly; "what is it like?"

"It is a society of ladies and gentlemen for practising concerted music—chiefly sacred. We meet once a week, in the Mechanics' Institute, and have concerts every quarter. You must take a

ticket, Mrs Monkton, for even if you do not care to sing, it will admit you to the concerts, and we shall want your subscription."

Miss Laura Filmer was one of the most active members of the Choral Society, which was as much in want of funds as it was of voices.

"Oh! I know what you are alluding to, now!" exclaimed Nelly, "only I had not heard it called by that name. A gentleman who was here the other day, was trying to persuade me to belong to it—a Mr Rumbell, I think—a white, fat man"

"A white—fat—man!" slowly repeated Mrs Filmer; "is your sister-in-law alluding to the *Reverend Mr Rumbell*, Matilda?"

"I should scarcely think so—I can hardly believe so!" gasped Mrs Prowse, in her horror and agitation lest the repeated delinquencies of her brother's wife should by any means return on her own head.

"Yes! that is he!" replied Nelly, nodding her head to Mrs Filmer, "one of the cathedral canons, I think Dr Monkton said—a very ugly, pale man. He sat here a long time, one afternoon, and did all he could to make me take a ticket for this society; but I had just promised Dr Nesbitt that I would not. I told Mr Rumbell that I should be no loss, for I know scarcely anything of music—but I shall be very happy to subscribe all the same, if that will do any good."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mrs Monkton, that Dr Nesbitt, our cathedral organist, has already called upon you?" now solemnly inquired Mrs Filmer.

Now, Dr Nesbitt was a man who never called on any one, especially a stranger, and even those ladies with whom he was most familiar (including Mrs Filmer herself) had the greatest difficulty in luring him to their houses, for, added to his eccentric and reserved habits, he was exceedingly shy.

"Oh, yes!" replied Nelly, laughing, "twice, I think—or three times, and what a funny old man he is! He came in first one evening, when I was sitting alone at the piano, and trying to sing, and he made me go on, although I was horribly frightened. He says I shall be able to sing and play both, if I practise, and he is going to teach me. He has spoken to Dr Monkton about it, and he is to come here three times a week, to give me a lesson. And how beautifully he plays himself! he sat here for nearly two hours, yesterday evening, playing to us until I could hardly bear to listen to it. It made me feel so glad, and yet so miserable!"

Mrs Filmer could hardly believe her ears.

Dr Nesbitt—who, although in the pay and employment of the church, had actually refused to give lessons on the piano to her own daughter, on the plea that he had given up teaching—to offer to instruct this stranger in the elements of music! Dr Nesbitt, who could hardly be persuaded to touch the instrument for the amusement of herself or her friends, to sit for a couple of hours playing to a raw girl, who acknowledged that she knew nothing about the science! It was impossible—Mrs Monkton must be either mistaken or wilfully deceiving them. Dr Nesbitt would never so risk his interests in Hilstone.

"If this be true," she said, with the utmost rudeness, turning to Mrs Prowse, "I don't think, from what *we* know of Dr Nesbitt, that it is very likely to continue—it must be a mere freak on his part; but I shall mention it to him all the same. However," rising from her seat, "we have, doubtless, detained Mrs Monkton quite long enough from her anticipated pleasure. For all the good it has done, my dear, I might have saved you the trouble of giving her any intimation of my intended visit. But the doctor will be sorry when he comes to hear of it. Good morning to you, Mrs Monkton!" and with merely a bow, Mrs Filmer swept grandly out of the drawing-room, closely and obsequiously followed by the canon's wife.

Laura Filmer was more polite than her mother; she stayed behind to bid farewell to her new acquaintance, and to repeat her request that she would join the Choral Society. "If Dr Nesbitt says you have a voice, you may be sure you have, and we want good voices very much. My brother says there are several ladies in his regiment who can sing, but mamma is so bigoted against the military. Do join us if you can."

"But I promised Dr Nesbitt I would not," replied Nelly. "He declared the choruses would pull my voice all to pieces, and he wouldn't teach me if I did. Besides, he said they all quarrelled so—there was hardly any time for practice."

"And so they do—he is right there," returned Miss Filmer, "but mamma is waiting, and I must go;" and then she added, hurriedly, "I wish you hadn't said quite so much, just now, and affronted her; I should have liked you for a companion, I am sure I should. Good-bye!" and with a friendly shake of the hand, she ran after the other ladies. The comments almost immediately passed in each carriage upon the occupants of the other were not dissimilar in character.

"What is your friend like, Nelly?" inquired her brother, as she took her seat beside him.

"Perfectly insufferable, Bertie! both in speech and manner. Pray don't mention her again, or you will completely spoil the pleasure of my drive."

And in the dean's carriage it was—

"Well, Matilda! all I can say is, I am sorry for your brother—extremely sorry. I had thought better of him, and of his wish to advance instead of lowering the interests of Hilstone! A more forward young woman, both in manner and speech, I think I have seldom met."

And the jackal could only bemoan the family misfortune, and trust that her dearest Mrs Filmer would visit the offences of the new comer on neither her brother nor herself.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NELLY IS TAKEN TO TASK.

DR MONKTON returned from London on the following morning, in anything but a desirable temper. He had been summoned there, to a consultation concerning some surgical operation, by men who had full faith in his judgment; but on their meeting to discuss the case, it happened that he totally differed in opinion from them respecting the treatment to be pursued. The other doctors were all agreed; Dr Monkton alone was obstinately assured that they were mistaken. However, as he was in a minority of one to three, and the danger was imminent, his advice was put on one side. The operation was performed, and being successful, he was proved to have been altogether in the wrong.

This was what had galled him: he would rather the patient had died twenty times over, so that he might have triumphed above his colleagues. As it was, the self-gratulations of the other men sent him back to Hilstone in the worst of tempers.

He would have liked to have poisoned them all three, but as that was impracticable, he parted with them as politely as ever, and returned home to vent his ill-humour on the first person who should be so unfortunate as to offend him.

When James Monkton has been elsewhere described as a passionate man, the term bore allusion to his temperament, and not to his temper. A warm temper usually accompanies a warm heart: quick words and quick repentance go together; and a

cold-blooded person who is slow to wrath is generally slow to forgiveness also. It was thus, unhappily, with Nelly's husband.

He was not hasty to take umbrage because so few things had the power to touch his feelings. At the same time, where he had once been offended, he never forgot the injury. He was so narrow-minded that he could make no allowance for actions engendered by a difference of disposition, and he had so little generosity that he had never been known to confess that he was in the wrong.

It was his nature to cherish resentment even to malice, but he showed his policy in this particular by only oppressing such as were weaker than himself.

Like his sister, he was no real friend to animals or children, or even women, except where his own advancement or gratification was concerned.

He could be bland and gentle in the extreme, with a Mrs Filmer, or a Mrs Brooke, however annoyed he might feel at being called up in the middle of the night because either of them fancied she had a pain in her little finger ; but he could speak harshly to a dying woman or child, for whose sake he had been troubled in like manner to inhale the unpleasant fumes of an ill-ventilated cottage.

He prided himself on the care which he took of his well-bred and well-fed horses, and his leash of valuable greyhounds, whilst he could kick a poor half-starved mongrel over the threshold of the cottage above alluded to, or strike a costermongers's unoffending donkey athwart the nose, and smile to hear the howl of the one animal, or to see the shudder with which the other would silently remonstrate against such needless cruelty.

He forgot, or rather he had never possessed a heart large enough to comprehend the truth that if our love for animals springs from a generous wish to protect the weak and defenceless, it will be extended to the whole brute creation, and be more largely drawn upon in behalf of the unfortunate than the prosperous. But to revert to his behaviour on the morning he returned to Hilstone.

He had met his wife with less warmth than usual, although he had been unable to find fault with the beaming, cheerful face, which had welcomed him home. He had only cut her rather short when she was volubly describing their pleasure of the evening before, and Nelly had thought that he looked tired and worried, and laid it to the fatigue and anxiety which he had

probably gone through. She was perfectly aware that one half of the life of a professional man must be a sealed book to his wife ; and was too sensible to make any inquiries that might annoy her husband. But she had not the least idea that his silence proceeded from ill-temper ; and after he had finished breakfast, saw him enter his consulting-room, with full belief that his cheerfulness would be restored by luncheon-time.

There were several poor patients waiting to consult him about such trifling ailments as their babies' blotches, or their own small pains and aches ; but he found so much fault with the first two or three for troubling him with such nonsense that the remainder shrunk together, and looked almost afraid to speak.

Long, who, in his capacity of confidential servant, usually attended in the room on these occasions, and who had seen too much of his master's moods, not to know what was the matter with him, went from one group to the other, entreating the people, if their business was urgent, to speak up at once, and if not, to leave it until another day.

"The doctor's been up the whole night," he said to one woman who seemed to require a reason for the demand, "and is very tired, as well as in a great hurry. I daresay your baby's eyes won't be any the worse for waiting till to-morrow morning, Mrs Brown."

"Well ! they may, or they may not," grumbled the mother as she prepared to move off again, "but if so be they are, I can but take him up to Dr Nash, who wouldn't refuse to see a suffering child at any hour. He never neglects the poor for his own convenience, bless'im," but before the concluding words had escaped her lips, the door was luckily closed upon her and several of her companions ; and the rest of the gratis patients having been summarily disposed of, Long and his master found themselves alone.

"Don't let anybody else in," said Dr Monkton quickly, as foot-steps were again heard in the hall, "I can see no more to-day."

"But you *must* see *me*, James," exclaimed the shrill voice of Mrs Prowse, as that lady appeared upon the threshold ; "it is absolutely necessary that I should speak to you, and at once. Long ! leave the room !"

Under the eye of his master, Long dared not even hesitate to obey the imperative command, and in another moment he was gone.

"What do you want with me, Matilda ?" demanded the doctor,

without looking up from the papers with which he was occupied, "I am very hurried, and must tell you I have no time to waste upon nonsense."

He would gladly have dismissed her as peremptorily as she had done his servant, for he was too sullen to desire converse with any one, but firmly as he could hold his own with most people, Dr Monkton stood rather in awe of his sister.

That man must have assurance indeed, who can afford not to feel somewhat afraid of such a woman's tongue.

"Nonsense!" echoed Mrs Prowse; "I wish you may find it nonsense! If Mrs Filmer once takes it into her head to call in Dr Nash, you may pack up your things and be gone, for there'll be an end to all your practice here."

At these words her brother almost forgot his sulks in his amazement.

"What *are* you talking about?" he inquired.

"I'm talking about what all Hilstone is talking about at this present moment, James; and about what would never have happened if you had thought fit to consult me before taking a step, as you used to do. But everything is changed now; and I trust you may find it changed for the better! You rush off to town higgledy-piggledy, without saying a word to any one, or leaving a single order or direction behind you—and this is the consequence."

"Am I to understand," demanded the doctor, interrupting her, "that you expect me to ask your opinion before I make a professional engagement, or your leave before I start to fulfil it?"

"No! of course not," replied Mrs Prowse, with unabated warmth, and not in the least checked by the severity of her brother's tone, "but before you trusted the maintenance of your name and respectability to the hands of a child, you might and you ought to have ascertained that she was equal to the charge."

"I suppose you are alluding to my wife," he remarked, indifferently.

"Yes, I *am* alluding to your wife," was the caustic reply, "and it would be a good thing for you, James, if I were the only person who had occasion this morning to allude to her."

"Why, what has she done?"

"What has she *not* done?" cried Mrs Prowse. "Shown the utmost rudeness and incivility to Mrs Filmer and her daughter, and offended them so highly that I doubt if they will ever be persuaded to enter your doors again."

At this news Dr Monkton's countenance visibly lowered. His sister could have told him nothing regarding his wife to cause him greater annoyance. He prided himself on the exclusiveness with which he usurped the best practice of Hilstone, and was well aware that all his good fortune in this respect arose from his connexion with the deanery. If Mrs Filmer chose to take offence at any behaviour on the part of himself or his wife, he knew that he might as well (as Mrs Prowse had said) pack up his things at once and be gone. All his indifference fled at once. He lay down his papers and advanced to where his informant was seated, fanning herself, from heat and agitation.

"You cannot be in earnest, Matilda," he said, quickly. "Helena is too sweet-tempered to show rudeness to any one. What did she do or say? and when did it all happen?"

"It happened during your absence of yesterday," replied the canon's wife, delighted to see how keenly his interest was aroused; "and I can vouch for the truth of it, for I was present myself. Mrs Filmer took the trouble to send over in the morning, and tell your wife that she intended calling on her in the afternoon, but Mrs Monkton, it seems, preferred taking a drive instead, and it was therefore merely by chance that she had a couple of minutes to bestow upon her visitors when they made their appearance. Such behaviour, at all events, as dear Mrs Filmer remarked to me afterwards, possessed the charm of novelty, for it is the first time that she has ever been treated in that way in Hilstone before."

"Perhaps Helena did not receive the message," remarked the doctor with knitted brows.

"I carried it to her myself, James."

"But since she was at home, surely Mrs Filmer might have stayed more than a couple of minutes if she had wished it."

"*If she had wished it?*" Do you think it likely that *Mrs Filmer*, the leading lady of Hilstone, would condescend to *wish* to prolong a visit, which, if considered as an honour, was decidedly not treated as such. Why, the first words your wife uttered were to complain that she had been kept from her drive by the delay in their appearance; and then she went on to speak to Mrs Filmer in the most extraordinary manner; just as if she were anybody! openly refused to join the Choral Society, and mentioned Mr Rumbell and Dr Nesbitt in such familiar terms that I cannot recall them without indignation. All I know is, that Mrs Filmer remarked to me afterwards, that she had never met

with a more forward and unpleasant young person. And that is a nice thing to be said of one's brother's wife by the daughter-in-law of the dean. I'm sure I cried with shame when I heard it."

Dr Monkton's thin lips were compressed firmly, and his face was growing darker every moment.

"I must speak to Helena about this," he said, with ominous brevity.

"Speak to her! well, I should rather hope you would, James, and if you wish to retain your friends, you must do something more than speak to her. You have chosen, without consulting any one, to marry a mere girl from the country, who appears to be perfectly ignorant of what as your wife is required from her; but that is no reason why you should let your reputation go to rack and ruin in her hands. She has been here a week, and she has done you enough mischief to last a year. But I knew how it would be, directly I heard that you had saddled yourself with that cripple."

"Why, what of him?" asked her brother in surprise. "What can he have had to do with the present business?"

"Everything," returned Mrs Prowse with emphasis; "you must be blind if you cannot see that the wishes and opinions of that young man rule your wife. I suppose you think you're her master, but you'll never be that so long as her brother is in the house. Why, a child might see how she is guided by him. It was nothing yesterday but '*my brother wished it*,'—'*my brother would have been disappointed*,'—'*my brother is waiting*,' and so it is in all things. That boy is everything, and you are nothing, and I believe she married you more for his sake than for her own."

This shaft, though fired at random, was so unfortunately true, that it made Dr Monkton furious. He had known from the commencement that he influenced Nelly only through his conduct to her brother, but it was a hard truth to hear from the lips of another.

"Take care what you are about!" he exclaimed, sharply turning to his sister. Her sallow face turned whiter at his address, and her hard black eyes gleamed sternly at him, but she only tossed her head and replied—

"Well, if it isn't true, any one would think so."

"That is my business, and not yours," he said, severely.

"And that brute of a dog, too," ran on Mrs Prowse, attempting to change the current of his thoughts; "no one who had any

regard for you or for your property, would keep an animal like that about the house. Mrs Filmer was astonished—perfectly astonished—at seeing it in the hall yesterday, and said she wondered at any one expecting a lady to enter the same place with it. However,” continued the canon’s wife, as she rose and shook out her skirts, preparatory to leaving, “I considered it my duty to inform you of the circumstance, and you must do as you please regarding it. All I can say is, that I sincerely hope your wife’s extraordinary behaviour may not be permitted to influence the cordiality with which the canon and myself have always been received at the deanery. If I perceive any alteration in dear Mrs Filmer’s manners towards us, however, I shall know who to thank for the change. One cannot touch pitch without being defiled.” And without waiting to explain whether her quotation bore allusion to Mrs Filmer, Nelly, or herself, Mrs Prowse jerked out of her brother’s room.

As soon as she was gone, Dr Monkton sat down to collect his thoughts, and resolve upon his actions. As he did so, his anger grew deeper and deeper against the cause of his annoyance. As long as his sister had been in the room, irritating him by her observations, it had been chiefly directed towards herself ; now that she had disappeared, it reverted to his wife. He had never felt disposed to be harsh with Nelly yet, there had been so little time and so little reason for anything but caressing her ; but now, his dread of decreasing popularity, and the sting which some of Mrs Prowse’s words had left behind them, added to his previous ill-humour, combined to raise a mood which was destined to surprise her.

After the reflection of a few moments he rose suddenly and rung the bell for Long, and the request, “Ask your mistress to step here for a minute,” was soon followed by the appearance of Nelly herself. She had been just going out with her brother, and was arrayed in her walking things. She came in with a smile on her lips, half curious, and half expectant, for she could not conceive why her husband should send for her during his business hours, and just behind her, treading on and rending with his weight her muslin dress, appeared her constant attendant, Thug.

“Do you want me, James ?” she naturally, though perhaps unnecessarily, asked.

“Yes ; or I should not have sent for you,” was the discouraging reply ; and then as she closed the door, and he perceived the mastiff by her side, he added, “I wish to heavens, Helena, that

you would not take that animal with you wherever you go. *You* may like your rooms to smell like a stable, but it is more than I do."

The look—the manner—the tone of voice, were what she had never experienced from him before. Nelly started, and changed colour—but the next moment she had reopened the door, and ordered the dog into the passage.

"I am sorry," she said gently, "I am very sorry, James, that he annoys you; I had no idea of it."

"It would annoy any one," he answered, "to have a brute like that always at his heels. The wonder is, that you can like it yourself."

"But how can I prevent it?" she said, with a look of perplexity. "He has never been used to be alone, you know, and he *will* follow me everywhere. But I will take care he does not come in your room again. He must learn to stay entirely in Bertie's or mine."

"He ought not to be in any room at all," grumbled the doctor: "his proper place is the stable. However, I have something of much greater importance to speak to you of now, Helena. What on earth can you have meant by your treatment of Mrs Filmer, yesterday?"

"My treatment of Mrs Filmer?" said the girl, advancing close to her husband's side. "*How* did I treat her, James?"

"Infamously, if what I hear is true. You refused to remain at home to receive her after she had sent you an intimation of her coming, and when, by chance, you met her, you behaved so rudely, that both she and her daughter have declared that they will never enter the house again."

"But who says that I was rude?" demanded Nelly, with wide open eyes.

"My sister," replied Dr Monkton.

"Then it is a shame of her! it is a great shame," exclaimed his young wife, indignant at the exaggeration which had been used respecting her conduct of the day before. "I was not rude at all, James! I am sure I was not. I waited at home an hour and a half on purpose to see Mrs Filmer, and when she came I talked to her as I would have done to any other lady. She was very disagreeable in her manner towards me though, and I was sorry afterwards that I had put off our drive for her sake. I am sure it was no pleasure to see her; and I won't do it another time."

Now, although Dr Monkton had sent for Nelly with the intention of being very angry with her, her sweet aspect and gentleness of manner had at first almost disarmed him. But this last bit of rebellion recalled him to a sense of his duty

"But you *must* do it another time, Helena! you must behave far better another time than you have done this. I have sent for you now expressly to remonstrate on such conduct. What arrangement can you possibly have made that you could not have put off until to-day, or to-morrow?"

"Why, didn't you say yourself, before you went to London," replied Nelly, with the most charming pout, "that we might have the carriage and go to Coombe Wood?"

"Pooh! Coombe Wood!" retorted the doctor, "any day would have done for Coombe Wood. You must understand at once, Helena, that Mrs Filmer is a very important person in Hilstone; and that it is absolutely necessary that you keep on friendly terms with her. She has it in her power to make or break anybody here."

"But we had made all our arrangements before I even heard she was coming," urged Nelly. "We had set our hearts upon going to Coombe Wood, and it would have been such a terrible disappointment to us, to give it up altogether."

The plural pronoun, in his present state of mind, jarred upon James Monkton's ear.

"*We*," he repeated, "who are *we*?"

Of course he knew as well as she did, but he made the demand with the sole view of bringing the cause of complaint prominently forward.

"Why, Bertie and me of course, James," replied Nelly, staring at such a question.

"That's just it!" he said, eagerly seizing the opportunity which her answer afforded him. "*We* should have been disappointed, and therefore the expedition could not be deferred until another day; if it had only been *your* convenience which had been called in question, you would have been ready enough to comply with my sister's advice. Now, I'll tell you what it is Helena, your attention to your brother is all well enough in its way, but I'll not have it interfere with your attention to my friends, nor your obligations as the mistress of this house. From this time society will make certain calls upon you, to which you must respond irrespective of any self-imposed duty to Robert. He has already monopolised the best part of your life; the rest belongs to me."

"But James"—— she began, falteringly.

"I wish to hear nothing more upon the subject," he answered decisively, as he prepared to leave the room. "As long as Robert remains with us, I am willing to give him every luxury which my means can afford, but that does not include your company whenever he chooses to command it. If you had not, by your devotion, rendered him utterly selfish, he would be the first to see the necessity of a change. He has the old woman to attend to his wants, and the man to take him out for his airings; what more can he desire? Any way, except when entirely at liberty to dispose of your own time, he cannot have my wife. So do not let me have to speak to you again on this subject." And passing through the open door, Dr Monkton left Nelly to her own reflections.

CHAPTER XL.

AND RESOLVES TO DO HER DUTY.

At first they were very bitter ones. It was not her husband's angry looks or words that she so much resented (though she had little expected, and thought she little deserved them) as the knowledge that they had been induced by his sister's unjust representations. She believed that, had it not been for them, the doctor would never have thought of objecting to her care of Bertie, or of imagining that it interfered with her courtesy to his friends. For the moment she hated Mrs Prowse, hated Mrs Filmer, hated Hilstone, and almost everybody in it. But Nelly was too sweet-tempered to cherish such vindictive feelings long. It was but a little while before better thoughts arose; but a few minutes spent on the sofa, where her husband had left her, before she was ready silently to acknowledge that she might not have been sufficiently conciliating in her manner towards her new acquaintances; that she ought, perhaps, to have appeared to value their attentions more, and her own and Bertie's pleasures less; that she was, after all, but a very unimportant personage in comparison with Mrs Filmer, who was a married woman of so many years' standing, and had been mistress of the deanery nearly as long. Nelly felt all this, and resolved, in consequence, that she would do her duty better for the time to come, but how far her ready compliance was attributable to her new-born fear, perhaps even she was incompetent to decide. Yet, she knew that she was afraid, she could hardly tell of what. The terms in which Dr Monkton

had spoken of her brother rankled in her heart. She could not forget them ; she could not shake off the distrust which they had engendered, nor lose the remembrance of who had prompted him so to speak.

She felt that it was necessary for both their sakes, that she should yield implicitly to her husband's wishes—even though dictated by his sister ; but she yielded under protest.

It was the obedience of fear, not that of love ! When Nelly left her husband's consulting room, on that morning, to join her brother, she had conceived a dread from which she was never after wholly free,—a dread which, though almost undefined, had still the power grievously to oppress her.

She told herself again and again, that her fears were futile, that her husband's words had meant nothing—that no one had the desire or the capability to part her from her brother, so long as Bertie expressed a wish to remain at her side.

Yet the trouble was unallayed, and from that day she began to watch him with more than her former solicitude.

She told him but little of what Dr Monkton had said to her ; she would have been afraid to repeat that part which related to himself. When he rallied her upon the length of her absence, and asked whether a doctor's consulting room was a proper place to make love in, and what the patients had thought of her intrusion, she gently silenced him with the remark that the interview had not been such as to render it a fit subject for jesting.

"James is vexed, I am sorry to say, at my not having made a more formal business of receiving Mrs Filmer and her daughter, yesterday. It seems that she is a very important lady in Hilstone, much more so than I had any idea of, and if I offend her, I may do him harm."

"And pray, who took the trouble to tell him about it ?" demanded Bertie.

She was walking by the side of his wheeled chair at the time, and they had ordered the man who conducted it, to turn into one of the pretty quiet lanes by which Hilstone was surrounded.

"Mrs Prowse, I believe," replied Nelly, in a low voice.

"The interfering old cat !" exclaimed her brother, between whom and the canon's wife there already existed a mutual antipathy ; "what business is it of hers, I should like to know ? why doesn't she keep to her own house, and leave you to receive your visitors as you choose. I thought she had come for no good when I saw her smirking behind the other old woman, yesterday."

"Oh, hush, Bertie!" said Nelly, in a warning whisper; "pray don't speak so loud—the man will hear you."

"And what if he does?"

"He must think it so strange, darling, considering the connexion between us; besides, these things get repeated, and if it should come back to James's ears or her own, that you had mentioned her in those terms—only fancy!"

"Only fancy—what, Nelly? What harm could Mrs Prowse do me that I did not choose to accept at her hands? She must even keep a civil tongue in her head, if it comes to that, for it's your house, and not hers; and you could order her out of it, any day, if she made herself disagreeable."

Nelly sighed, and knew not what to answer. How could she tell him what she feared herself—that Mrs Prowse had so much influence over her brother, and so few scruples as to the method of using it, that she was far more likely to prove the means of turning Bertie out of the house, than to be turned out herself.

Bertie's temper was so uncertain, and his false pride was so little under control, that he would at once insist upon testing the truth of her supposition, and probably bring about the very disagreement between her husband and himself, which, from the manner in which the doctor had spoken of him that morning, she had reason to apprehend would not be difficult.

Whilst she was debating how she should caution him not to offend the canon's wife, Thug, who always walked so close by her side as almost to impede her footsteps, thrust his nose into her hand, and then jerked it upwards, as much as to say, "Notice me."

"She objects to Thug," said Nelly, dejectedly.

"What, Monkton's sister? Well, let her object, then, Nell! The dog is yours, not hers; and for my part, I shall in future order him to lie down right under her nose, whenever I have an opportunity."

"Oh, no! dear Bertie, pray don't!" exclaimed his sister, fearful of the mischief her remark might create. "She may not be so accustomed to animals as we are, you know; and though Thug is a darling, it is not everybody that would like him in the house. And I don't know why I should say that it is Mrs Prowse who particularly objects to him. It was James himself who said he made the room smell like a stable, this morning—but I fancied that his sister"——

"Of course she is at the bottom of it," interrupted Bertie; "when did Monkton ever object to Thug before? why, he used

to say, at Little Bickton, that the dog would be an ornament to any house, and that it was a pleasure merely to look at such a noble animal."

"And so it is," exclaimed Nelly, as she stooped to caress her favourite, "but still he *is* large, Bertie; no one can deny that; and if Mrs Prowse makes a fuss about him now, what will she say when the wet weather comes, and he gets his feet muddy!"

"I shouldn't care what she said; tell her, if she doesn't like to sit in your rooms, that she can keep in her own. You think too much of that woman, Nelly—you seem to forget that you are the mistress of Monkton's house, and not her."

Nelly could have answered, "Yes, but he *is* the master," had she not been afraid of raising her brother's suspicions; so she turned it off, by saying that she should be the first to think it a shame if Thug were permitted to spoil such carpets as theirs with the marks of his great clumsy feet; and before winter set in, she should teach him to wipe them on the mat every time he entered the house. She did not meet her husband again until dinner-time, and then, although Bertie was as cheerful as usual, and she herself quite ready to appear to have forgotten that anything unpleasant had passed between them, she saw at a glance that Dr Monkton had not yet succeeded in shaking of his ill-humour. Before she had known her husband much longer, she was aware that, if left to himself, he took days and sometimes even weeks to recover from such an attack.

She had been accustomed to witness very similar displays of temper from Bertie, for in the duration of their evil moods Robert Brooke and his brother-in-law were much alike.

But Nelly could better understand the feeling in one case than in the other, or her love for her brother made her fancy that she did so. She had always attributed Bertie's fits of sullenness to the depression of spirits induced by the discomfort and lack of excitement which surrounded his needy home.

But why a man, prosperous and happy, like Dr Monkton, should find such difficulty in casting out the evil spirit, she could not comprehend; for that he was still angry with herself she would not believe. Her own nature was too forgiving to think so much wrong of another.

Yet, when she found that her remarks remained unanswered, that her smiles were unreturned, and that all her little arts to attract her husband's attention, or to excite his admiration, were unavailing, Nelly really became nervous. She began to think

that he must have heard something worse concerning her,—that Mrs Prowse had been trying to make more mischief between them. She caught herself starting whenever the doctor condescended to open his mouth, lest it should be to blame her again ; yet she was still more alarmed when a slight difference of opinion arose between him and his brother-in-law. She was so eager, on that occasion, to interpose her own ideas on the subject under discussion, with the generous view of turning the argument against herself, that Bertie took her sharply to task for unwarrantable interference in what was no concern of hers.

She could not help fancying that there was a still greater alteration in her husband's manner towards her brother than towards herself, for in nothing that Bertie advanced did Dr Monkton seem to agree ; and she was thankful, when the meal was concluded, to hear the former say that he intended to make the most of such an evening by going out again in his chair.

He rose and left the room, and they were alone. Her husband had also risen from table, and thrown himself upon the sofa.

Nelly had no pride—none of that odious feeling at least which is too often quoted as a virtue, and which prompts an offended woman to act contrary to her own inclination in order that she may enjoy the paltry triumph of forcing the man to assume the position which should be hers, and be the first to sue for pardon.

She did not love her husband ; if she had, such a state of things would never have arisen between them ; but she was anxious to be friends with him, and she felt no shame in confessing it. So she followed him from the dinner-table, and knelt down by his side, and taking his unwilling hand in hers, she looked full in his face with her sweet, serious eyes, and said, frankly—

“ James, I am so sorry I offended Mrs Filmer yesterday.”

“ It is not much use being sorry,” he replied, as he resolutely turned away from her pleading face.

“ Yes, it is,” she answered, cheerfully ; “ it is better than not caring at all, isn't it ? Because, perhaps I can remedy it, James. You know that I was not rude on purpose ; and if you will tell Mrs Filmer that it was thoughtlessness, I daresay she will overlook it this once, and I will promise you it shall not happen again.”

He was a man after all ; he could not resist such sweetness, nor rudely draw away the hand against which she had laid her cheek.

"I am very young, you see," continued Nelly, "and what your sister says is true—I am very ignorant of the ways of society. We had no grand parties nor fashionable ladies at Little Bickton, and I daresay that what would seem natural to me in the country would appear rude to people in a town. So if you will only take the trouble to tell me what to do, James, I will do it with all my heart."

He could not be generous enough to tell her all he thought of her compliance; but he stooped and kissed her broad forehead, and Nelly accepted the silent caress as a token of his forgiveness.

"Since you wish me to direct your actions, Helena," he commenced, with some pomposity, "(and it is certainly my place to do so,) there are several things my sister mentioned, in which you appear to her to have shown a want of judgment."

At this allusion to his adviser Nelly winced.

"Can't you decide for me, James, without consulting Mrs Prowse?" she asked, hastily.

He looked at her with astonishment.

"And what is your objection to Matilda, Helena? She is only too anxious to see you on good terms with Mrs Filmer, and all the other ladies of Hilstone, and conducting this establishment in the same style in which she did it herself. She has nothing so much at heart as my popularity, in which of course your own is concerned. You could not have a better counsellor with regard to the behaviour calculated to render you a favourite in Hilstone."

"Oh! very well, then. Go on!" said the girl, impatiently. She did not dare disturb their newborn peace by remarking that the last thing she cared about was to become the pet of Hilstone.

"Matilda considers that it was ill-advised of you to refuse to join the Choral Society, of which all the principal ladies here are members, including Miss Filmer herself, and as my wife you are of course bound to encourage everything which advances the interests of the town."

"I told Miss Filmer I would subscribe to it," cried Nelly.

"But I should wish you to become a member, Helena."

"It will take up so much time," she argued. "Your sister says they meet for private as well as public practice."

"If it monopolised twice as much, it would be time well spent," replied her husband; "you have not much to keep you at home, Helena."

Nelly thought of two or three evenings each week spent away from Bertie, and made a final struggle for liberty.

"But, James, I promised Dr Nesbitt that I would not join it."

"Ah! that is another thing that I must mention to you," he said, quickly. "I hear that you spoke far too freely of Dr Nesbitt and Mr Rumbell before Mrs Filmer. Those gentlemen are both, as it were, in the retinue of the dean, and his daughter-in-law does not like to hear that any such are more intimate at other houses than they are at the deanery. If they come here often, or mix with us on more than friendly terms (such as in the case of Dr Nesbitt giving you singing lessons), you must learn not to speak of it, or you will cause jealousy amongst your neighbours, and perhaps do harm to your friends themselves, by exciting Mrs Filmer's anger against them."

This was presenting an entirely new phase of social life for the contemplation of his unsophisticated listener, and when Nelly opened her eyes wide at the receipt of her husband's communication, it was with unaffected surprise.

"Are you really in earnest, James?" she said, "or are you laughing at me? What possible concern can it be of Mrs Filmer's if Dr Nesbitt comes oftener to this house than he does to the deanery? Why, he doesn't belong to her, does he?"

At this ingenuous question Dr Monkton so far forgot his ill-humour as to laugh.

"She would like him to do so, my dear, body and soul, and those who desire to remain in her good graces had best pretend to think that he does. And since, as regards ourselves, a great deal depends upon her not being offended with us, you will see the necessity of regulating your behaviour towards her and every one connected with the deanery, not so much by what *you* think correct, as by what you see that *she* does."

For a few minutes Nelly remained silent, then she gave a deep sigh.

"What is the matter now?" said her husband, not unkindly.

"It will be so dreadfully difficult," she replied. "I am afraid I shall never be able to do it properly."

"To do what?" he inquired. "If you allude to the Choral Society, Helena, so long as you attend the practices, it little matters if you sing or not."

"Oh, no! not that," she said, shaking her head; "I meant with regard to Mrs Filmer, James. You know I am so foolish; I have been accustomed to say just what I think, to laugh when

I feel inclined, and to remain silent when I don't wish to talk ; that I am afraid I shall always be making mistakes. If a thing is not wrong or unkind, it seems so natural to me to say it, and as for keeping a secret, or pretending what I do not feel, I never could do it, and I never shall."

But to this strain of frivolity Dr Monkton saw fit to put a summary conclusion.

"You *must* help such things, Helena, and you must do them into the bargain, when the contrary mode of action will affect our welfare. And if I find that your own sense is not sufficient to point out to you the advisability of altering your behaviour in these respects, I shall be compelled, for my own sake, to remove all such obstacles from your path as might tempt you to act otherwise."

At these words Nelly suddenly left her kneeling position beside her husband, and walked towards the window. She could not pretend to misunderstand his threat, nor to be blind to the implied truth that if she did not submit of herself, he would rule her through her love for Bertie. Nothing that he had ever done or said before had sunk him, like this, in her opinion. She despised him for the means he had so unnecessarily adopted to control her, although she dared not but submit to his guidance.

"Only tell me what you wish me to do, James!" she replied, in an altered voice from the window, "and I have said before that I am ready to do it. I daresay even telling stories will come easy to me after a time, for there is no saying what we can do till we try."

Dr Monkton did not consider this tone of jesting to be any change for the better, for he was a man who could never take a joke when directed against himself.

"I see nothing whatever to laugh at," he said, "in my desire that you should learn to behave like other people. A minute ago, Helena, I thought you were in earnest in wishing to please me ; now I suppose I may conclude that you have no intention to try!"

One thought of Bertie, and her spirit of sarcasm fled before it.

"No, indeed, James! pray don't say that. I have every wish and every intention. I will call on Mrs Filmer whenever you think proper ; and you shall go with me to see how well I can behave, and I will try—indeed I will—to make the people in Hilstone like me as much as possible."

She held out her hand, and he drew her towards him, and ratified a fresh forgiveness. But this caress was still less palatable

to Nelly than the last. Let a man once utter a word, or perform an action, which shall make a woman really *despise* him ; which shall cause her to rank him lower in the scale of creation than herself, and compassion may remain, but love is gone for ever. In this case there was no love to take its flight ; but the hope of its arising even had been quenched by Dr Monkton's threat.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE AMATEUR CHORAL SOCIETY OF HILSTONE.

NELLY was as good as her word. She not only strove to conciliate Mrs Prowse by asking her advice with respect to the time, manner, and style in which she should return Mrs Filmer's call, but actually requested her sister-in-law to accompany her to the deanery, and promised to put on her best dress and bonnet for the occasion.

Dr Monkton had been careful to secure the ear of his patroness before his young wife crossed her threshold, during which interview he begged her to ascribe Nelly's apparent neglect to her ignorance of the laws of etiquette, and as the handsome persuasive doctor was a great favourite with the dean's daughter-in-law, his petition was granted, and Mrs Filmer expressed herself graciously prepared to overlook Mrs Monkton's first offence.

And when this favourable opening was followed by a state visit from Nelly and Mrs Prowse, during which the bride sat bolt upright on the deanery sofa, looking as shy and saying as little as even the heart of the canon's wife could desire, the promise of pardon was confirmed, and a bond of peace, if not of cordiality, was tacitly signed between them.

Miss Laura Filmer, who, without so much dignity to maintain, had never regarded the conduct of Mrs Monkton in the same light as her mother, appeared charmed with her new acquaintance, and readily extracted the promise, which poor Nelly had bound herself to give, that she would at once become a member of the Hilstone Choral Society. Captain Herbert Filmer also, who was at the deanery at the time, was vastly taken with the sweet blushing face of their visitor, and lauded it so much, both in town and barracks, that the sycophantic herd by which he and his sister were surrounded, could but commence to sing to the same strain, and under such patronage Nelly was soon in danger of

becoming, what she had so little wished to be, a Hilstone favourite.

Her successful visit to the deanery was shortly followed by an invitation to dinner there, which in due time her husband informed her they must return. This was an event which Nelly had greatly dreaded ; but, when it came to pass, she was surprised to find how little it affected her. Dr Monkton had excellent taste, and he took care that all trouble concerning the entertainment should be taken off his wife's hands. She had nothing to do but to adorn herself, and receive her guests ; and when eventually she took her seat at the head of the table, and surveyed the exquisite manner in which everything was arranged, it seemed to her ignorance as though the feast had sprung up by magic for her convenience. She was rather quiet during the whole evening, for she felt the importance of the position to which she was so unaccustomed ; but she comported herself with much grace, and the general opinion, led by the outspoken compliments of Laura and Herbert Filmer, was, that Dr Monkton's bride was a "very sweet young creature." Mrs Filmer, who could not quite forget her first reception at No. 15, was not so ready to subscribe to the last sentiment, but as she nodded her august head when some one ventured to repeat it to her, and said, "Very well in her way, but wants manner ; if Matilda Prowse will take her in hand, I daresay she'll do," it was generally believed that she did not disapprove of the doctor's choice, and the verdict was pronounced in Hilstone accordingly.

Whilst all this gaiety was going on down-stairs, Robert Brooke remained in his own room. He had said that he should do so ; and dearly as Nelly loved him, and little as she enjoyed any pleasure without him, she felt that his decision was best, particularly as her husband had said upon hearing it that he should have thought it very strange if he had had any other intention.

She had visited her brother, however, more than once during the evening, and he had admired her blue dress and the forget-me-nots she wore in her hair, as much as she could possibly desire. But after each brief interview she seemed to return to her guests with less cheerfulness. Bertie had said that he should never feel his exclusion from such scenes ; that he had not the slightest wish to mix in them : yet on this first occasion of his being left alone, he did seem to feel it.

She even thought, by the dulness of his eyes and the brevity of his answers, that some of his old sullen spirit was getting the

mastery over him again. For since Nelly had promised her husband that she would do all in her power to make the people of Hilstone like her, her greatest trouble had been through her brother, for whom alone she had conceded to what was so much against her inclination.

It had been very hard to hear Bertie's sarcasms on her rapid change of opinion,—to hear him laugh at her meek surrender of her rights; at her forbearance with Mrs Prowse; her deference to Mrs Filmer, and not to tell him for whose sake she so humbled herself. He had sneered at her for want of spirit; had prophesied that she would never be fit to take her place in society, and averred that if the management of her house and herself was to be thus put into alien hands, they had better have remained at Little Bickton, where at least they were masters of their own.

He had done worse than this; for, convinced that it was the fault of Mrs Prowse that his sister was not left more at liberty, he had tried to resent the fancied tyranny by seizing every possible opportunity to annoy the canon's wife, which ill-advised proceeding had provoked a feeling of enmity between them which increased each time they met.

It was in vain that Nelly, dreading the consequence of such a feud, entreated him to be more forbearing with her sister-in-law; he was determined, as he said, that Mrs Prowse should see that one of the family, at least, had a little spirit, and finding that the more she remonstrated, the more mischievous he became, she directed her whole attention to preventing any needless encounter taking place between the belligerents.

The printed ticket, by the purchase of which she was enrolled a member of the Amateur Choral Society of Hilstone, was duly sent to her, and Nelly prepared to accompany her sister-in-law to the place of practice on the first Wednesday evening after its reception.

It was a wet, unpleasant night, for September had now arrived, and the month had set in with rain.

"I think we had almost better have stayed at home this week," remarked Nelly, laughing, as she picked her way along the streaming flagstones.

"What! missed *the practice* for a little rain?" returned Mrs Prowse, "I hope you will not ever think of doing such a thing, Mrs James. Nothing short of illness should be suffered to keep you away."

"But a damp air like this must be very bad for the voice,"

said Nelly, "not that I care about mine, for I know I shall not be able to sing a note. I cannot read music at first sight."

"Then our meetings will be of the greatest advantage to you," replied Mrs Prowse, "for it was for the purpose of teaching the members to read concerted music fluently that the society was instituted. I don't think it will rain again before we reach the Institute, and should it do so on our coming out, I have ordered Crummy's Double to fetch us home."

"What!" exclaimed Nelly, in amazement.

"*Crummy's Double*," repeated the canon's wife, with the utmost gravity; "it is a most convenient little conveyance, peculiar to Hilstone; however, you will doubtless see it as we return to-night."

At this juncture they reached the door of the Mechanics' Institute, and Nelly had no further opportunity for inquiring why the "convenient little conveyance" bore such an extraordinary name, for in another minute they had entered the lobby, which was also the ladies' retiring-room, and were being elbowed and hustled about amidst a crowd of female members, who each with a roll of music beneath her arm was trying to secure a safe corner in which to deposit her bundle of wraps and umbrellas.

Nelly's first idea was that they were all dressmakers; the next, that they were all old women. When she had leisure, however, to discriminate amidst the motley group, she perceived that there were a few gentlewomen amongst it, and perhaps a dozen under twenty years of age; otherwise she found no reason to alter her original opinion. The lobby was a mass of dust and confusion, and filled with an endless war of tongues. Here was Mrs Roe, with spectacles perched across her Roman nose; and Miss Hammond, the curls of whose gray wig kept up a constant bobbing with her recognitions; and Miss Laura Filmer, for whom the whole society obsequiously made way; and the Misses Harley, who followed and toadied her wherever she went. Nelly, who had laid aside her walking things as soon as she entered the room, was staring about her in utter amazement, to think that women could talk so much about so little when she was perceived by Miss Filmer, and immediately taken possession of.

"Ah, Mrs Monkton—so here you are! Take my arm—do—and let us get out of this mob."

The words were not uttered very politely, but the "mob" smiled and fell back, leaving a narrow passage through which Nelly felt herself dragged into the outer hall again.

"The worst of a society of this kind," said Miss Filmer, quite

audibly, as they ascended the staircase together, "is that it is impossible to exclude the tradespeople. It is a local institution you see—the only requisite for admission to which is a good voice, and we should offend half the town by being particular. Even if it were possible to be so in a place like this, when half the so-called gentry are retired tradesmen. Now, the Harleys, for instance—— Oh! here they are," continued the young lady, without the least discomposure, as she was overtaken by the subjects of her remark. "Well! Miss Harley, I suppose you won't try the solos again to-night, as I understand Mrs Clarence is to be here."

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied the Miss Harley she addressed, who was pinched and elderly, and had a decidedly red nose. "Mrs Clarence is here, I believe, and I know she has a very loud voice—*coarse* I should call it; but whether she understands music remains to be proved."

"She is a pupil of Garcia's, anyhow," replied Miss Filmer, who seemed to hate the Hilstonians as much as her mother adored them, and had a decided taste for anything military, although she was not permitted to indulge it by associating with the officers' wives.

"Do you not take some of the solos yourself?" inquired Nelly, thinking that, as one of the most important members of the society, Miss Filmer would be entitled to choose in such matters.

"Oh, dear no! I am a very insignificant personage as far as the singing is concerned," laughed her companion; "I have scarcely any voice, and should not come here at all if it were not for the fun of the thing. I'm only a second—what are you?"

"Contralto, I believe," said Nelly, guessing she alluded to the quality of her voice; "at least Dr Nesbitt says so."

"I'm glad of that—then we will sit together and amuse ourselves by quizzing the old women. It will kill you to hear Mrs Roe sing, and Mrs Prowse. Oh! I forgot though—she's a relation of yours, isn't she? I'm sure I beg your pardon; but she *will* try the solos, and does make such a dreadful hash of them. I hope Mr Rumbell will offer them to Mrs Clarence. It will drive all the others mad."

The room in which the meeting was held—except for a few benches placed at one end for the accommodation of the singers—was bare of furniture. Round the space left vacant were ranged the members of the orchestra, and in the midst of them, baton in hand, was standing the fat canon, Mr Rumbell, bowing and smiling to each lady as she entered.

When Miss Filmer appeared with Nelly by her side, he left his position, and advanced into the centre of the room to shake hands with them, and politely express his pleasure at the latter having joined his staff.

"I expect we shall have a treat to-night, Miss Filmer, a regular treat—Mrs Clarence is here; and I'm thinking of offering her the solos. What do you say?"

"Offer them, by all means, Mr Rumbell, and make her take them. It will be delicious! Have you a book to lend Mrs Monkton?"

He produced a copy of Haydn's Seasons—armed with which Nelly followed her new friend to the seats appointed for them. Mrs Prowse, who flattered herself that her shrill pipe was a soprano, was already ensconced upon the other side of the room; but she bustled across it before the practice commenced, in order to air her intimacy with the dean's granddaughter before the less fortunate members of the society.

"My dear Laura," she said, in a tone which was at all events audible to all who were near, "do you see how unfortunately I am placed, close by the side of *that* Mrs Clarence?—actually next to her—so very awkward. And she is looking as composed the while as if she had attended here every night of her life. What assurance, is it not? Ah! Mrs Roe, I see you are listening to what I say. You and I agree upon this point, I know. But did you ever see such coolness? I really believe she thinks Mr Rumbell will offer her the solos. He! he! he!"

"She can hardly expect that, I should say," remarked Miss Filmer, with the most deceptive gravity; "not at least while *you* are in the room, Mrs Prowse; and if I were you I wouldn't allow her to accept them if he did."

"Oh! but he *won't*, my dear," was the unaffected reply; "he *couldn't*—it would never be allowed; but I must run back again. The naughty man is getting impatient—he will break his baton if he raps us to order in that fashion. Good-bye." And the canon's wife skipped playfully back to her seat on the other side of the room. As she quitted them Nelly glanced towards the spot where the much-abused Mrs Clarence was quietly sitting, but could only discern the profile of a fresh frank face, the owner of which appeared to be attentively studying the music she held in her hand. She was wondering why such an inoffensive-looking woman should be the cause of so much spite, when her attention was redirected to the proceedings of the evening by the president

(after having made a short speech expressive of his satisfaction at welcoming two new and valuable additions to the society) giving out that the practice for that night was to consist of the first book of Haydn's Seasons.

Following this announcement there came a universal buzz, during which Nelly easily perceived that instead of reading their parts at first sight, most of the members had been studying them beforehand.

"We miss the third page, dear."

"No, not if there is any one to take the recitative."

"Mind you give us that first B well."

"Yes, and don't forget that the time changes after the opening movement." All this and much more being said as fast as possible, and at the same moment, whilst the speakers' heads were nodding significantly at one another.

"Ladies! ladies!" at last exclaimed the president in despair, finding that rapping with his baton to attract their attention only served to increase the din, "it is impossible that any business can be done whilst you refuse to give me a hearing."

"Now he's getting angry, the naughty fellow," tittered Miss Harley.

"We shall really have to scold you," said the youthful Sophy Hammond in an undertone, as she shook her finger at the supposed delinquent.

"I wish to goodness you'd hold your tongues," said Miss Filmer abruptly, turning to her loquacious neighbours. "One would think you were a pack of children behind there."

This reproof had the desired effect; the giddy creatures' voices sunk into whispers. Order was restored, and the baited president, who had actually left his dais and walked twice across the room in his irritation, returned to his place again.

"I was going to observe," he recommenced, "that it is very desirable we should get up Haydn's Seasons for our next concert, but there is a difficulty about the solos, which are by no means easy."

"We can have a professional to take them, when the time comes," snapped Mrs Prowse.

"Very true!" replied Mr Rumbell, "but they are so intermixed with the choruses that it is impossible to practise one without the other."

"We had better not attempt it then," said Mrs Roe.

"Happily for the society," continued the president, smiling, "I

have been fortunate enough to find a way out of the dilemma. This lady," waving his hand towards Mrs Clarence, "is kind enough to say that she will sing the solos for us, and I am certain that she will do them every justice."

At this undisguised announcement of their president's base intentions, Mrs Clarence smiled and bowed; whilst the other members of the Choral Society glanced at her and one another, speechless with vexation.

"I thought—I thought, Mr Rumbell," panted Mrs Prowse, "that to avoid invidious comparisons, it was a rule of the society that no resident in Hilstone should be allowed to take a solo."

"Mrs Clarence is not a resident," replied the canon, waiving the objection. "We consider the regimental ladies as only temporary visitors, more's the pity! But we are wasting time, and will proceed at once, if you please." And at a wave of his hand, the orchestra struck up the opening symphony.

There was nothing then for the ladies to do, but to swallow their indignation as best they might, or reserve it for a more convenient opportunity.

To Nelly, to whom Haydn's Seasons was as a volume of Greek, and who had consequently nothing to do but to watch the proceedings of those around her, all this was as good as a play. She was so infinitely amused at what she saw and heard; she laughed so immoderately and so long, and Laura Filmer took such delight in making her laugh more, by her whispering observations, that at last she grew seriously afraid that her merriment would be noticed by Mrs Prowse, and that she should get into fresh trouble with her husband.

"Pray don't, Miss Filmer," she repeatedly entreated, "pray don't set me off again, for my sister-in-law is watching us, and she will be so angry."

"And won't they let you laugh, poor child?" said Miss Filmer, compassionately.

"Oh! yes, indeed!" was Nelly's quick reply, "but not here you know; not in so public a place. It is not proper; and I might give offence to several people."

"Well, you can do as you like," said Miss Filmer, "but you can't object to my pointing out a few objects of curiosity to your notice," and in consequence, the "objects of curiosity" continued to defeat all poor Nelly's efforts to behave as became the wife of Dr Monkton, and the sister-in-law of Mrs Prowse. The symphony

was over, and the singers rose for the opening chorus. It was scrambled through in a very tame manner, and should have been followed by a tenor solo, taken by Mr Rumbell's fellow-canon, Mr Pratt, but which on the score of unproficiency, that gentleman begged to be excused until the succeeding week. It was now Mrs Clarence's turn for display; and amid a battery of ill-natured glances she rose to read a very difficult recitative.

She accomplished the first few lines very well, considering the many obstacles they presented to an amateur; and her clear, powerful voice, fully equal to the occasion, rang through the empty room.

But after a while, she slightly hesitated, and then with a quick glance at the leader, gave forth a wrong note. It was both in tune and time, but it was not the note written down by Haydn. Mrs Clarence, being a real musician, perceived her error at once, which few of her fellow-students did, and stopped with an apology. The president was about to say it was of no consequence, and desire the orchestra to re-strike the chord, when a titter ran audibly through the room: a piece of discourtesy intended to confuse the singer, which had been put in motion by Mrs Prowse, and eagerly seconded by all who were envious of the new member.

Mrs Clarence, unaccustomed to being laughed at, looked round, colouring deeply.

Laura Filmer asked aloud, "Who was that?" and even Nelly in her surprise could not help exclaiming—

"How very rude!"

The tittering ceased, but most of the ladies continued to smile furtively behind their music-books, and Mr Rumbell was just going to apologise for such a lapse of good breeding on the part of his pupils, when Mrs Clarence's voice was heard distinctly to ask—

"Did I not understand you to say, Mr Rumbell, that this society was expressly for the practice of reading music at first sight, and that the members were bound not to learn their parts at home? Else I would have looked over these solos before I came here, and not have ventured to expose myself, as it seems to me, by the merriment of these ladies, I must have done."

Before the president could answer, and assure her she was right in her conjecture, Miss Filmer said across the room—

"Yes, Mrs Clarence, you are perfectly correct in thinking so; albeit there is scarcely a member who does not study the choruses

in private, before attempting to sing them here. Perhaps, however, considering what a jumble we make of them, it is just as well that it is so. But there is no one who is competent to do what you have done to-night, and we ought all to be greatly obliged to you for accepting the thankless office."

Such a speech from the dean's granddaughter to a perfect stranger could not fail to stem, if not to turn, the tide of public opinion. Mrs Prowse bit her lip, and looked sadly conscious, as did several of her colleagues, whilst Mrs Clarence, reassured by the timely compliment, which was echoed by the president, proceeded with her recitative and finished triumphantly.

Nelly admired Miss Filmer for the boldness with which she had spoken—she saw that her sarcasm was only elicited for the benefit of such as deserved it, and from that evening she took a great fancy for the seemingly discourteous girl.

The practice concluded without further disturbance, and as soon as it was broken up, a crowd of agitated females, Mrs Prowse amongst the number, surrounded Mr Rumbell's dais, threatening to overwhelm him with their questions, arguments, and disputes.

"Just look at them!" exclaimed Miss Filmer, aloud, pointing out the excited group to Nelly's notice; "they'll kill that poor man some night, between them. I often wonder to meet him, walking about alive and unharmed on Thursday mornings. But come, Mrs Monkton, let us leave them to consume him by themselves."

"It would take a long time to do that," laughed Nelly, as she followed her down the stairs. "There is plenty of him, I am sure."

"Yes, I know you think so," responded her new friend, "and mamma has not forgotten that you called him a white—fat—man. He is an especial pet of hers, and the terms offended her greatly."

"But it is true," remonstrated Nelly; "he is white and fat."

"Perfectly true, Mrs Monkton; I am not the one to dispute it, only the truth must not always be spoken, and especially in Hilstone—as you will find out for yourself before long. But it is pouring with rain: is your carriage coming for you?" and on being answered in the negative, Miss Filmer continued, "Let me take you home, then—it is all in the way." But just then Nelly remembered "Crummy's Double," and declined the offered civility.

"No, thank you, Miss Filmer! I believe I had better not. I must wait for my sister-in-law, and she said that, in case of rain, she had engaged Crummy's—Crummy's—something or other, to come for us."

"Oh! 'Crummy's Double,'" said Laura Filmer, with a laugh, "then there's a treat in store for you, and for me, too, for I shall wait to see you get in, and hear how you like it. Where is Mrs Prowse? Miss Hill, will you please run up-stairs, and tell Mrs Prowse that Mrs Monkton and Crummy's Double are alike waiting for her."

In another minute the canon's wife had joined them, and the ladies, having procured their wraps, proceeded to the door together.

"Now, pray don't stand in the draught, my dear Laura," pleaded Mrs Prowse; "your carriage will be up directly, and your dear mamma will be so vexed if you take a cold."

"It's not my carriage I want, but yours," replied Miss Filmer; "I am anxious to witness the success of Mrs Monkton's first attempt to enter 'Crummy's Double.'"

"I am sure there is nothing to see!" said the canon's wife, in a tone of dissatisfaction.

"That is my concern," replied Miss Filmer; "I have the happy facility of taking pleasure in small things."

At the door of the Institute stood a tall, narrow conveyance, more like a double sedan chair, on wheels, than anything else, and which was drawn by a couple of donkeys. Nelly was just going to exclaim at the singularity of its appearance, when Laura Filmer continued in a gleeful voice—

"Here it is! here's 'Crummy's Double;' now ring the bell, and draw up the curtain, for the play is just going to begin."

A lad came forward and opened the door of the vehicle, into which Mrs Prowse, too offended even to bid Miss Filmer good-night, stepped in silent dignity.

Nelly, after the exchange of a laughing farewell, essayed to follow her sister-in-law, but stood balancing herself on the step instead.

"Where am I to sit?" she asked, with surprise, for the interior seemed filled even with the sparse figure of Mrs Prowse.

"Ah! where indeed?" echoed Miss Filmer from the doorstep; "this is just what I came to ascertain, for I feel quite curious on the subject."

"I wish to goodness you would enter the 'Double,' Mrs James,"

said Mrs Prowse, testily, "and not stand there, making us the laughing-stocks of the whole society. There is plenty of room here for two; and always has been."

Thus adjured, Nelly made a bold plunge into the carriage, and alighting on the back seat, felt as though she were sitting in an infant's high chair, whilst her knees grated against those of her sister-in-law, and her head just cleared the roof above it. Mrs Prowse next gave the order to start; and "Crummy's Double," lurching violently to one side, and then to the other, set off, shaking and jolting over the stony street, followed by a most irreverent peal of laughter from the grand-daughter of the dean.

"I cannot imagine what has come to Laura Filmer, to-night," said Mrs Prowse, as soon as the rattling of the donkey-chair would permit her remarks to be heard; "she is not at all like herself—but indeed the practice altogether has been a most unsatisfactory one. How did you get on, Mrs James?"

"Not very well; but it is all new to me, you know. I had enough to do to look about me."

"I observed that you laughed a great deal," said her sister-in-law.

"I really could not help it!" replied Nelly, apologetically.

"I saw nothing to laugh at, myself," was the unsympathetic response.

And indeed poor Nelly had gone down several degrees in the estimation of the canon's wife for her levity during the evening.

Mrs Prowse was almost ready to return to her first opinion that she was both "forward and presuming," almost sorry for what she had said to Dr Monkton, concerning her, only the day before, namely, "that if Mrs James could be but separated from that very unpleasant and exacting young man, her brother, whose influence over her was all for harm; and given over to the guidance of herself and dear Mrs Filmer, she really thought that, with patience, they might in time make something of her."

CHAPTER XLII.

BERTIE SHOWS THE EXTENT OF HIS GRATITUDE.

"WHERE are you going, Nelly?" said Bertie, fretfully, one afternoon a few weeks afterwards, as his sister, attired in her walking things, thrust her head into his room, to nod him a cheerful farewell.

Touched by the sound of his voice, Nelly crossed the threshold to bend over his sofa.

"Only to give Thug half-an-hour's run in the meadows, darling!" she said, affectionately. "But do you want me?"

"No, not at this moment," he answered in the same discontented tone, "but you won't be long, will you? and you'll stay with me, this evening?"

Nelly's face fell.

"I *can't* this evening, Bertie! It's Wednesday, remember; the night of the choral practice."

"You are not obliged to attend it."

"Not exactly *obliged*, perhaps; but if I do not, Mrs Prowse makes an unnecessary fuss about it, and speaks to James, and then he is angry with me; I had a lecture, last week, because I remained at home with you."

"What a wretch that woman is!" exclaimed Bertie, angrily: "she is always interfering between us now. I declare not a day passes but there is something unpleasant. But I'll pay her out for it, as sure as my name's Brooke."

He was for ever making impotent threats of the kind, which only resolved themselves into his being impertinent to the canon's wife, and her complaining to her brother on the subject, until Nelly had begun to dread a collision between them.

"You must not speak like that, dear Bertie," she said, on the present occasion. "You aggravate Mrs Prowse to such an extent already, that you have to thank yourself for half the annoyance she causes you. Why, the reason I want now to give Thug a run is, that the poor brute has been shut up for half the day on your account."

"And by whose orders?"

"By those of James; but he gave them in consequence of his sister telling him that you had urged the dog to put his dirty feet upon her lap yesterday. You know she hates the animal, and has not much love for you, and yet you cannot leave us in peace when we are so."

"That's right, take their parts!" exclaimed Bertie; "I believe you like them both a great deal better than you do me. You are altogether changed since you came to Hilstone, Nelly. You used never to think it any trouble to sit by me for a few hours when I was sick or sorry at Little Bickton, but now your head is so full of your choral practices and your dinner parties, and

your fine new acquaintances, that I suppose you would consider it a loss of time to look after a useless cripple like myself."

The utter injustice of this accusation did not lessen its power to sting poor Nelly. That Bertie, her brother, for whom she had done all this, for whom she daily endured the uncongenial society of Mrs Prowse, and meekly submitted to her husband's wishes; that *he* should think she was enjoying herself without him, and preferring scenes of pleasures to lightening the burthen of his weary hours, was too much. She had not cried violently for a long time; she was too much afraid of the remarks which the traces of her emotion might provoke; but in the present instance, Bertie's unkind words broke down all her self-control, and she threw herself sobbing beside his couch.

It was so hard—so very, very hard—that *he* should be the one to censure her!

"Oh! Bertie—darling—Bertie, my dearest brother—you know—you must know it is not the case. I would like to be with you always, dear; I have more pleasure in sitting by your sofa than mixing in any company; but how can I help it? James says, that as his wife, it is absolutely necessary that I should visit and be friendly with the people of Hilstone; he insists upon my accepting the invitations which we receive, and giving parties in return, and I have no choice. If I were to refuse to go out, or receive his friends here, on the plea that I did not like to leave you alone, he might say"—

"What *could* he say?" demanded Bertie, who was not yet convinced but that his sister might do as she chose.

Nelly remembered herself in time.

"He might think it was a frivolous excuse, darling, and say that I owe as much attention to him as to you."

"At all events, you might try the experiment," persisted her brother.

"I have tried," she answered, in a low voice.

"And with what success?"

"James said, I must do as he bid me."

She dared not tell him further.

"But now, Bertie, since I cannot stay with you to-night," she continued, trying to speak more cheerfully, "cannot we think of some amusement for you in my absence? What will you do with yourself?"

"There is nothing to be done in this beastly place," he said, despondingly.

Nelly started. Hilstone a "beastly place," merely to live at which appeared, at one time, to be the summit of his desire. She almost thought that she must have been mistaken in his words.

"Nothing to be done here," she echoed. "Why, Bertie dear, what is it that you want? You have everything you need to make you comfortable at home, and every convenience for going about. What more could you have anywhere?"

"What's the use of having a thing to go about in," he answered, rudely, "when there's nowhere to go to?"

"Nowhere to go to?" repeated Nelly.

"Yes, nowhere to go to. I wish you wouldn't keep repeating my words like a parrot, Nell. I made sure, of course, that a large town like Hilstone would possess a theatre and music-hall, and have something going on occasionally which should amuse a man; but I declare the place is perfectly stagnant. There's not a young fellow to be seen in it, out of the barracks, nor a respectable billiard-table either. It's sickening."

"But, Bertie," said Nelly, to whom this plaint for music-halls and billiard-tables was something entirely new. "You never had any of these things at Little Bickton."

But this crowning proof of his sister's want of sense irritated Robert Brooke beyond bearing.

"At *Little Bickton*," he said, sneeringly, "of course I didn't have them at Little Bickton, and you may remember how happy I was there into the bargain. Why, what on earth do you imagine I wanted to leave the place for, if it were not to procure those pleasures with which it was unprovided? And now, this hole is nearly as bad as the other—in fact, I'm not sure that it isn't worse. In the country, I could at all events have *you* to sit with me whenever I felt lonely; but here, you are away three nights in the week, and Monkton is always with you the other three. It's wretched work for me; and if I go out, it's not much better. I used to say there was nothing to be seen at Little Bickton but grass and cabbages, but here there's nothing to be seen but hedges and dust; unless I go through the town, which never varies either, and jolts me to death. And as for all your old women acquaintances, who come jabbering round my chair, I hate them like poison, and would go five miles the other way to avoid meeting them."

Nelly rose from her position with a sigh. What could she say which should make a spirit like this contented? And she

had hoped—ah! how she had hoped—that this change of life would bring her brother all the happiness he coveted.

“I will stay with you, dear,” she said, gently, laying aside her gloves and parasol. “This next hour, at all events, is my own.”

“But I don’t want you,” he replied, gloomily; “I would much rather be alone, and you have made your eyes so red, that you had better go out and get rid of them, or your dear sister-in-law will demand the reason of your tears. And then, when she hears it is my fault, there will be another row.”

So Nelly gathered up her things again, and kissing Bertie as warmly as though his words to her had been all affection, called her mastiff and took her way to the meadows.

The animal was at first exuberant in his delight at being once more free; he had sadly felt being shut up in disgrace in a small room on the kitchen floor, and his mistress had felt it almost as much as himself; but now she seemed to have no heart to rejoice with him on his liberty. His pleasure was chiefly shown in tearing about a quarter of a mile in advance, and returning as swiftly, with his nose to the ground, until he reached Nelly’s side, when he would give a bark of joy, and a bound which nearly sent her on her back. It was in vain she cautioned him not to upset her; Thug’s gratitude and ecstasy were too great; and it was not until the intelligent brute had leisure to perceive there was something wrong with his young mistress, that he could be persuaded to walk as steadily as usual. When he did observe that she greeted his gambols without a smile, he needed no further warning to be sober.

Which amongst us does not know what it is to have a dog sympathise with our trouble?

Poor Nelly’s tears had too much cause to flow, and when she found herself traversing the quiet meadows, where she could be secure from observation, they ran down without restraint. She could not but keenly feel the confession of her brother’s disappointment.

If this was the case, if Bertie’s lot was really no better for the change her marriage had effected in it, what was there further to hope or look for? She could not marry over again; there was no chance of her being able to offer him the choice of another home! She had done what she had done of her own free-will, certainly; but at his most earnest solicitation and desire, and now that things had not turned out as he had anticipated, there was no retreating, no going back to the dear old stupid life they had

passed at Little Bickton, because the new life at Hilstone had been tried and proved a failure. Her brother was free, it was true (if so helpless and dependent a creature could ever be free of those who loved him), but she was tied—that was the galling thought—whatever happened to him, or between him and her husband, she had delivered herself over to another rule and jurisdiction, and must abide by the consequences. For Bertie's sake, to enliven his sad existence, to prolong, as she had fondly hoped, his precious life, she had yielded up her freedom, and now that she was captive at his own request, he blamed her for not resisting the will of her lawful master.

But if she did resist, she knew what the consequence would be. She had observed for weeks past—ever since, indeed, the first conversation they had held upon the subject—that Dr Monkton's manner towards Bertie was changing, that he not only appeared ready to quarrel with him, but anxious to find a pretext for doing so ; and more than once he had made her heart stand still by saying, with reference to some of her brother's words or actions, that he would not bear them much longer. Every fresh order he gave her, also, seemed issued with the intention of separating her as much as possible from Bertie, and forcing her to break through all the dear old customs which had been hers from infancy.

The doctor's hours for retiring to rest (like those of most men of his profession) were compelled to be very irregular, but he seldom left the house of an evening without reminding his wife to go to bed early ; for he admired her country roses too much not to desire their preservation.

Whenever Bertie came home in good time, Nelly had observed this request, but latterly he had been almost as irregular as his brother-in-law. Sometimes it had been eleven, or even twelve o'clock, before he returned to St Bartholomew's Street, and his sister had seen him into his room, trembling the while lest her husband should come back before she could slip into her own. Her pale face and heavy eyes, however, one morning at the breakfast-table, elicited such a string of searching inquiries from Dr Monkton, that she found it impossible, without deception, to conceal the truth from him.

He did not blame her on that occasion, although he was angry at the cause of her appearance, but he strictly forbade her ever again to sit up for her brother.

"But it does me no harm, indeed, James," she had earnestly

pleaded ; " I have always been used to sit up for Bertie, and am none the worse for it."

" I am the best judge of that," he answered, decidedly ; " at all events, my desire is, that it does not occur again."

" But he *wants* me," she went on, with a view to gaining her point. " Bertie is not comfortable unless I read and say ' good-night ' to him, and see that he has all he requires."

" The old nurse can attend to that, I presume," replied her husband, " else, what is she here for ? And whilst we are on the subject, let me tell you, Helena, that I do not approve of your attending your brother in his bedroom. It is not the usual custom, and it excites remark. My sister has already mentioned to me how very strange it appears in her eyes, and consequently will in those of others. Robert has all the help he needs, and if not, he can have more. Any way, there is no necessity for your being one of his servants, and therefore, whether he is home early or late, I desire that in future you allow him to find his way into his bed alone."

At this command, which appeared to her so needlessly unkind, Nelly at first felt angry. From her childhood, ever since they had ceased to occupy the same bed, she had been accustomed, in the true motherly fashion, to creep into her twin-brother's room the last thing at night, to read the Bible and see that he was comfortable, and whisper to him to be *sure* and not forget to say his prayers. And Bertie had always declared that he could not go to sleep unless Nelly's hand tucked in the bed-clothes, and even at Little Bickton had kept her up until the most unreasonable hours in order that she might perform this last ceremony for him. At the thought that all this was to be omitted for the time to come, that the only moment in the day which she had for private converse with him must be given up ; that from morning to night they would never now be sure of meeting without witnesses, Nelly even felt bold enough for remonstrance.

" Oh ! I *can't* do that, James ! " she had heedlessly exclaimed. " I must kiss Bertie the last thing at night, and tuck him up, or I shall not be able to sleep myself."

But the next moment she had repented her temerity. Her husband's brow grew suddenly dark, and his eyes like his sister's, as he said, not warmly, but with clenched teeth—

" *You can't ?* but you *must*, Helena, and there's an end of the matter. Remember, you are no longer at Little Bickton. Your brother may have seen fit to make a slave of you while there, but

I will not have your health and nerves destroyed, and your necessary rest curtailed by dancing attendance on him, here ; and if you cannot manage to make him understand this of yourself, refer him to me, and he shall soon know my mind on the subject."

What could the girl do after this ? She might have defied her husband to his face, as netted fishes flap against the meshes, but every one knows how long that is likely to last, and that the more they flap the sooner they are exhausted ; or she might, had she not been herself, have disobeyed him secretly, but that was not Nelly's nature, and in either case detection and correction must have followed, and her correction would have been through Bertie. So that the poor little girl, in a very unheroine-like fashion, had betaken herself humbly to bed at ten o'clock every night since, to creep out of it again when she heard her brother's slow and shambling step upon the stairs, and stand with bare feet to watch him cautiously through an unclosed chink of the door, whilst she whispered, "Good night, my darling, and God bless you !" before he disappeared. And in excuse for such unusual conduct on her part, she had only been able to tell him that her husband did not think it good for her to sit up later, and been doomed in return to hear herself called "selfish" and "lazy," and to be told that if she had not suggested the necessity of such a change, he was sure that Monkton never would have pressed it. For his sake she was submitting to everything that she liked least, and Bertie could neither comprehend her devotion nor her fear. And now, added to it all, he was not even going to be happy himself.

As Nelly—walking alone through the quiet meadows—reflected on these things, she cried bitterly.

CHAPTER XLIII.

NELLY AND NIGEL BROOKE MEET AGAIN.

THE meadows through which she rambled lay at the back of Hilstone ; were three or four in number ; had a trout stream running through them from end to end ; and were connected with each other by ordinary turnstiles. They were a chosen resort of Nelly's, not only because their appearance transported her thoughts from the bricks and mortar of Hilstone back to the buttercups and daisies of her dear old home, but because her favourite Thug enjoyed nothing so much as scampering back-

wards and forwards along their broad expanse, or rolling his huge carcase over and over, like some donkey at play, amongst the thick rank grass with which the trout stream was fringed; and on the present occasion, although not quite so boisterous as usual, he was sufficiently content to make her entertain no thoughts of turning back until he had had his full allowance of holiday.

The meadows were quite empty, and Nelly mechanically passed through the first turnstile and the second without raising her eyes from the ground. The third led into a lane, after crossing which, a fourth field would take her almost back to her home. But as she was nearing this third stile, Thug first hung back with a low growl, and then with a sudden bound cleared the gate into the road beyond. Nelly thought nothing of the dog's action—he had scented another dog perhaps, or seen a plough-boy—it only roused her sufficiently to make her raise her hand to her eyes and dash away the tears which still hung upon their lashes. But as she passed through the turnstile, some one drew back to make way for her, and she looked up to see the last person on earth whom she expected—her Cousin Nigel!

In a moment her face had crimsoned over, and her breathing become hurried, whilst he appeared equally moved by the surprise of their encounter.

But Nelly was a creature of impulse; her first feeling was joy at meeting him again, and she obeyed it, with an outstretched hand, and the genuine exclamation—

“O Cousin Nigel! I am so glad to see you.”

But before he had had time to return her friendly greeting, recollection came pouring back upon the poor child's heart; his quarrel with her brother and her husband flashed across her mind, and with a vague and sickly sense of having done something wrong, she turned away again towards the meadows saying rapidly—

“But I had better go home—perhaps I had better go home.”

“Have they forbidden you even to speak to me then, Nelly?”

It was his own kind voice, and she paused to listen to it and to consider. After all, she had not been so forbidden. Bertie had often spoken to her in his bragging manner since their arrival in Hilstone, of what he should say and do in the event of coming in contact with his cousin; but he had not seemed to calculate on her meeting with Nigel Brooke when alone. As for her husband, she had never heard him mention the name of the

master of Orpington Chase since they had been married. So she felt at least that she would be committing no actual disobedience by exchanging a few words with him, and after a moment's thought she said—

“Oh, no!—they have not indeed!” but so faintly that he had to stoop in order to catch her words.

“Is it your own inclination then which prompts you to avoid me, Nelly? Do you believe all that Robert says of me?”

She shook her head.

“Well! then you will surely not refuse to give me a few kind words. It is a long time since we met—nearly a twelvemonth. I suppose that you have almost forgotten me?”

“I shall never forget,” she said, sadly. “I was so happy at the Chase, and I have so regretted all that has passed between us since. How is Aunt Eliza, Cousin Nigel, and what—what does she think of me?”

In her anxiety for an answer to her question, she for the first time raised her eyes to his, and enabled him to gain a full view of her face. He started backwards.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed; “what’s the matter with you, Nelly? What have you been doing to yourself?”

“Where?—how do you mean—in what manner?” she said, almost as surprised as her companion, and not in the least knowing to what he alluded.

“Your face—your eyes—your mouth!” he replied, slowly, as he scanned her features. “Oh! my dear girl—how you are altered!”

His meaning flashed upon her now, and remembering, if it were the case, whence the alteration came, the burthen of her care seemed suddenly to press upon her too heavily. The wonder expressed in her cousin’s voice, the compassion of his gaze, no less than the affection with which he spoke, struck some chord in Nelly’s overcharged heart, and she answered his question with a burst of tears.

“Oh! am I altered?” she said, as well as he could distinguish through her sobs. “Am I so altered in so short a time? I ought to be—I know I ought to be?” And she laid her head down on the wooden stile, and cried like a child.

When Nigel Brooke saw what effect his words had had, he grew quite nervous. Men generally are so when they have made a woman cry; they cannot understand that such a sudden and violent emotion may be not only harmless but a relief. He stood

by alternately urging Nelly to be calm, and looking up and down the lane in dread lest some one should approach. But fortune favoured him, and when his cousin was once more composed, her tears had been without other witness than himself. And her whole anxiety then was to know what he could possibly have thought of her folly.

"Whatever can you think of me, Cousin Nigel, breaking down in this absurd manner," she said, trying to smile, "but somehow it has been all so sudden—and speaking of the Chase and Aunt Eliza, and you were very good to me, and to both of us—and"—

"Don't talk of it any more, Nelly," he answered in a voice scarcely less faltering than her own. "If you have felt the cause which separated us, I have felt it no less, God knows! And I knew all along that it was no fault of yours, and that you could not act otherwise than as your brother dictated to you. And now, all things are changed, you see, and there is no need for us to make ourselves miserable by raking up the past. I am glad to think that you are well married, and that in one respect at least you will never have reason to regret that Robert's decision was a hasty one. And now let me hear something about him and yourself! You are happy of course, as you ought to be—and how is he? Is his back any stronger than it used to be?"

"No!—not the least, Cousin Nigel, nor ever will be, I am afraid; and he has a dreadful cough. Sometimes I lie awake half the night to hear him coughing, but he says he does it in his sleep, and scarcely remembers it in the morning. Dr Monkton used to say—he used to think, I believe—that there were several remedies that might benefit the weakness of his spine, but we have never tried them."

"But how is that?" asked Nigel, who had not failed to notice the formal name by which Nelly mentioned her husband.

"I scarcely know—but I suppose Dr Monkton has altered his opinion about him. I spoke to him about it once, and he said it would be a sheer waste of time and money, and that Bertie will never be other than he is. But—oh! I do wish," with a deep-drawn sigh, "that he could cure his cough."

"Robert takes medicine for his cough, I presume."

"Yes!—at least he ought to do so—but he is very troublesome about his medicine. Half the times he declares it will do him no good, and refuses to take it altogether, and when I do manage to force it down his throat, he makes as much fuss over it as if he were a baby!" And Nelly laughed a little low sad laugh,

which wonderfully contrasted with her cousin's remembrance of her ringing notes of old.

"Perhaps Bertie is not careful enough of himself?" argued Nigel. (How nice it sounded in her ears, to hear him speak the familiar name again.) "Keeps too late hours, and goes about too much—I suppose he is very gay and happy now—gay at least compared to the life he led in Bickton."

"I know he keeps late hours," said Nelly, sadly; "but he is not gay, Cousin Nigel, and I fear he is not happy, and that is just what was worrying me to-day before I met you. He seems to be so greatly disappointed in Hilstone—to have expected so much amusement and found so little, that he quite disheartened me."

"Were his anticipations very high, then, Nelly?"

"Oh, so high! there seemed no limit to them before I was—I was married," she said with a slight hesitation, for though she felt the comfort of some one to confide in, who, notwithstanding their estrangement, would take Bertie's part, she feared, by being outspoken, to reveal too much. "He thought that living in a town was to procure him everything—health, and pleasure, and society—and he never could talk sufficiently of all he should gain by the exchange. And I told him otherwise, I told him what I knew was true, that it was impossible with the affliction God had seen fit to put upon him, he could ever run about and enjoy himself like other men, and that if his life was easy and comfortable, he should learn to be content. But he would not believe me, he would not see things in the same light as I did; and this is the end of it!" she concluded, mournfully, little guessing how much she had told of her own history in this statement of her brother's disappointment. But Nigel Brooke understood it all, and even whilst thinking how mistaken was her devotion, he could feel thankful that she was the same Nelly whom he had fallen in love with, and that if she had been sacrificed in marriage, it was for the sake of others, and not for herself! Yet how his heart bled for her, as they paced side by side, up and down the silent meadows.

"My poor child!" he murmured, softly, "*I* could have done better for you than this!"

As soon as he had said the words, he regretted them. He knew that they bore a double meaning, and that Nelly might understand by them that her brother would have been the happier for not allowing his pride to prevent his accepting his

cousin's assistance ; at the same time, if she had any suspicion of his feelings for her ; if the same thoughts were in her mind that moment as were coursing through his own, she might interpret what he had said in its real sense ; that whether she loved him or not, he could have made her happier in marriage than he believed her then to be. Curious to ascertain the truth, if possible, from the expression of her face, Nigel Brooke glanced down at the figure by his side and started to find a pair of soft earnest eyes raised in wonderment to meet his own. For a few seconds the cousins gazed at one another, gazed whilst reality revealed itself to each, and Nigel learned that he was loved ; and Nelly, that she might have been his wife. Then the hot blood rushed in a torrent to the girl's face, and her eyes were quickly turned upon the ground, and she felt nothing, and knew nothing, excepting that she trembled, and was ashamed of herself, and sick of life ! So they walked together in silence, occupied with their own thoughts.

Nigel had intended next to ask her for some details of her amusements and employments ; but after this episode, everything on earth seemed too frivolous to speak of, and he rejected one topic after another as it rose into his mind.

But before they had proceeded much farther, he began to feel that silence is sometimes more dangerous than speech, and with an effort, broke it.

"You have still got Thug, I see !"

With what relief did Nelly hear him speak again in his ordinary voice, and with how much eagerness did she embrace the opportunity to make him believe that she was very cheerful indeed.

"Oh, yes ! You didn't think I should part with him, did you, Cousin Nigel ? My dear old 'baby,' what should I do without him ? But he has been in sad disgrace to-day."

"How is that ? I thought he was perfection."

"So he is in my eyes ; but you see every one is not of the same opinion. And Bertie spoils the dog to an unpardonable degree. So I am sorry to say that yesterday, Master Thug forgot his manners, and put his dirty feet upon a lady's dress. Yes, Thug, you did," she continued, as the animal, hearing himself named, came up to her side, "and to a lady who hates all dogs into the bargain, both great and small, so of course she didn't like it."

"And what heavy penalty did you award him ?"

"He was shut up for some hours in a room by himself, which he cannot bear ; but as he had no idea what the punishment was

for, I am afraid it will not do him much good. The only effect it has had as yet, is, that directly I let him out, he knocked me right down for joy."

"I hope you have given up that dangerous habit of allowing him to spring at your throat and face, Nelly. It is really not safe, particularly with an animal of so treacherous a nature as a mastiff. I can assure you I have often shuddered to think of the first time I saw him do so. Do you remember it? It was when you were making pastry in the kitchen at Little Bickton."

At the mention of Little Bickton, Nelly's face, which had been doing its best to smile before, again clouded over.

"Ah! I never make cakes or pastry now," she said, regretfully, "and I used to like it so much, and how fond Thug was of the raw dough. I used to roll it into pills and make him catch them. But Mrs Prowse would think it dreadful, I suppose, if I were even to hint at doing such a thing."

"You have pleasanter employments now, I hope," said her cousin, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "or at all events, more suitable ones to your station in life. It is all very well for a woman to know how to make such things as pastry and beds; but when she has a head as well as fingers, she need never be at a loss for occupation. Do you sing, Nelly?"

"A little. I am learning to do so with Dr Nesbitt."

"And I suppose you are a member of the Hilstone Choral Society."

"Yes, but I hate it; and that reminds me that I must not be late for dinner to-day, as it is practice night. Perhaps I had better go at once."

They had walked back to the end of the first field by this time, and she prepared to return home the same way she had come. She held out her hand at parting, and he took it, and did not seem inclined to let it go again.

"Is there no chance of your brother ever liking me again, Nelly?" he said, looking almost wistfully into her face,—"no hope of our ever meeting and mixing as cousins should?"

"I am afraid not," she faltered; "I have said all I dared, and more, but it has been useless. He seems determined, and he says that it cannot be—that it would not be right."

"But *you* are not afraid to hold my hand, dear; *you* do not regard me only as the son of your father's murderer, do you?"

Not afraid perhaps, but the clasped hands trembled strangely, and Nelly was so nervous that she could not speak. Presently

he seemed to guess that he was torturing her, for with a sudden wrench he tore his own hand away.

"You would not, Nelly, believe me that you would not, if you knew all the circumstances of the case. But, of what am I talking? It would be as useless now (as perhaps it would be difficult) to convince you that your brother is in error. Well!" with a sigh, "good-bye, then! but remember, if you are ever in difficulty or distress, that everything I have is at your disposal."

Then he drew a card from his pocket-book—

"This is my town address; a letter sent there will always reach me, and receive immediate attention. Nelly, don't quite forget me; don't cease to care for me, whatever they may try to make you believe or do. We may meet again—who knows what is in the future?—and under happier circumstances than these. Till then, God bless you always!"

He turned hastily, as if to go, but a low sound from her detained him. She had tried to answer him and failed.

"Did you speak, Nelly?" he asked.

"Not now?" she whispered, alluding to his mention of a meeting in the future. "Shall I not see you sometimes as to-day?"

The thought that it might not occur again revealed to her how dear the present interview had been. She had heard all that her brother had to say against the father of the man before her (and in part she had believed the story and shuddered at it), but she had never been able to connect the disgrace of that circumstance with Nigel Brooke, or permit it to have any effect upon the gratitude she felt she owed him. And she had too recently arrived at the knowledge of her own heart to be able to do more than feel the sweetness of her new sensations; she had had no time to realise their danger, or to calculate their wrong.

To Nigel Brooke, who thought he had never known how much he loved her till he gazed upon her fair young face again, her question was a strong temptation. But he grappled with and laid it. His was no weak heart to sport with open eyes upon the brink of a precipice, until he became so dazzled that he had no alternative but to cast himself over, or to be dragged away at the risk of life and reason.

He had known his own feelings for some months past, and now, to his sorrow, he knew Nelly's; and the fiat had already gone forth—they must part.

"There is little chance of it," he answered with as much calm-

ness as he could assume, "because I have long made up my mind to let the Chase, and believe, at last, that I have a reasonable offer. So, it is likely that before many weeks my mother and I shall have left Orpington to take up our residence in London."

Then, his heart torn by the downcast expression of her face, he hurriedly added—

"And if it were not so, Nelly, still we could not—we ought not—to meet. Dear child," looking her steadfastly in the face, "you *know* it will be best for both of us."

It was strange that in a moment of such misery, that one fond expression should have sunk into the bottom of her heart, and had the power to keep a warm spot there for evermore. Even as she raised her weary eyes to answer his remark, something of their despondent look had fled before it.

"Yes, you are right," she said, in a low voice, "it *will* be best for our happiness and for ourselves."

Their eyes and hands met once more, and then Nigel Brooke, sternly denying himself even a backward glance, strode steadily on in the direction of the Chase; whilst Nelly, her brain, heart, and soul alike in turmoil,—Nelly, who had left St Bartholomew's Street a child, returned to it—a woman!

CHAPTER XLIV.

MRS CLARENCE RESIGNS HER OFFICE.

FOR several hours after she had reached her home Nelly had no time for further thought.

To her dismay she found, upon arrival, that she was later than she had anticipated; the first dinner-bell had sounded; Dr Monkton was already in his dressing-room, and she had to hasten her own preparation as much as possible, lest she should offend him by a want of punctuality.

When they met in the dining-room, things did not appear much more propitious. Her husband was thoughtful and pre-occupied, Bertie evidently sullen, and in her nervous and discomposed state, Nelly yet maintained most of the desultory conversation which ensued.

The labour was so hard, and her efforts to amuse them so ungraciously received by both her companions, that it was quite a relief when, before the meal was concluded, Mrs Prowse arrived

to bear her off to the Choral Society, even though that lady did not appear to be in her most amiable mood on the occasion.

Nelly was playing with her dessert when her sister-in-law entered the room, and did not stir until roused by the tart observation—

“If you intend to dawdle about much longer, Mrs James, I must go without you. It is most important that I should not be late at the meeting this evening, for Laura Filmer has so bad a cold, that she will be unable to attend, and it won’t do for us both to be absent. So if you mean to accompany me, I shall be obliged by your getting ready at once.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Nelly, mechanically, as she rose from the table. “I had no idea you were in a hurry.”

But Robert Brooke resented the dictatorial style of Mrs Prowse’s address, and to his sister’s annoyance, came to the rescue.

“Is Nell *obliged* to go to this choral humbug, Monkton, whether she be ill or well?” he asked, in a tone of contempt which he knew best calculated to excite the ire of the canon’s wife.

“Are you not well, Helena?” said Dr Monkton.

Thus directly appealed to, she was compelled to announce that she was.

“What made you imagine she was not?” her husband next inquired of his brother-in-law.

“Mr Brooke is too apt to consider his sister unequal to any duties which are not undertaken for himself,” remarked Mrs Prowse, spitefully.

“And Mrs Prowse to urge her to take a part in anything in which it is impossible her brother can share,” he retorted, with less politeness than was due to the sex of his opponent.

Nelly, distressed beyond measure at this budding altercation, stood with the handle of the door in her grasp, uncertain whether to stay or to retreat; whilst Dr Monkton listened to the audacity of Robert Brooke with evident surprise.

“And what the devil is it to you whether she does or not?” he said, angrily, addressing his brother-in-law. “Helena has a tongue, and can speak for herself, I suppose; we want none of your interference;” and waving his hand, he signed to Nelly to go up-stairs, whither she soon heard herself followed by Bertie, who went into his own room, and after violently slamming, locked the door behind him.

She would gladly have excused herself then from accompanying Mrs Prowse to the choral meeting, for she feared the con-

sequence of leaving the two angry men in the house together, but she dared not make the breach wider than it was. So in a few minutes the sisters-in-law commenced their walk to the Mechanics' Institute, which they accomplished without having exchanged more than half-a-dozen words.

There had been a sad amount of bickering going on amongst the members of the Choral Society during the last few weeks. The dignity of those ladies who belonged to the ecclesiastical party had been quite unable to stand against the affront offered to it in the shape of a Mrs Clarence from "the barracks" being invited to stand up and lead their choruses; and poor Mr Rumbell had wondered ever since how he could have been so rash as to propose it.

He had been besieged, both in public and private, attacked alike in his sacred bachelor dwelling and in the High Street, by be vies of excited females, bearing copies of the printed rules of the society, which were known to have been drawn up by his own hand.

They thrust them under his nose, they forced him to read over Rule VI., by which it was set forth that—

"In order to preserve the general harmony so essential to the well-doing of the society, no member, resident in Hilstone, shall be selected for the purpose of singing the solos of the various works performed, but that if no non-resident member can be found fit to undertake such solos, the society shall provide a professional person at the quarterly concerts for that especial purpose;" and refuted all his arguments in favour of Mrs Clarence *not* being a resident, but a visitor, by asserting that, in that case, he had no right to have admitted her at all, as the society had been formed for the benefit of the towns-people; in fact, Mr Rumbell found that he had got himself into a regular scrape, and he almost wished Mrs Clarence had been dumb, before he had been struck by the beauty of her soprano voice.

"But who else is there to take the solos?" he exclaimed at last, despairingly, as gray curls and spectacles closed in around him, and shrill remonstrances vibrated on his ear; "only tell me that, ladies! Who is there, in Hilstone or out of Hilstone, who is competent to sing for you as Mrs Clarence does? If you can find me a non-resident member to take her place, the exchange shall be made, but till then, you must permit me a little licence in this matter."

Their president had said the words, and for a while they left

him in peace, though they were anything but at rest themselves. From that hour the object of Mrs Prowse and Mrs Roe, and Miss Hammond and others of the same clique, was to search the neighbouring towns and villages for a non-resident member, with a soprano voice—for there were many people living out of Hilstone who belonged to the society, but only attended the practices during the summer evenings.

At last they were successful; Mrs Roe was the fortunate woman who hit upon a young girl, the daughter of the clergyman of the hamlet of Wickley, who certainly possessed all the elements of a fine voice, but who was so young and shy, and ignorant, that she had not the least idea of using it. However, there were the notes; Miss Grey (as she was called) was proved capable of taking the upper C with almost as much force as Mrs Clarence herself (“and certainly with far more delicacy,” as Mrs Roe observed); so after having been invited for several consecutive evenings to that lady’s house, to be instructed by herself and her intimates in the parts required of her, she was dragged before the president of the Choral Society, and produced as a substitute for the obnoxious officer’s wife.

Poor Mr Rumbell was fairly trapped; he had passed his word, and he could not depart from it. He had drawn up Rule VI. himself, and dared not deny the work of his own hands. Here was the non-resident member; blushing, indeed, and ready to sink into the earth with confusion when called upon to exhibit her talents; but with the requisite register to render her a fit candidate for the honour of taking the solos of the society. Yet when he thought of her as an exchange for Mrs Clarence, the pupil of Garcia, he seemed for the first time to realise the extent of feminine jealousy.

“She’ll never do!” he said, trembling himself at the idea of having to tell the other lady that she must resign the ungracious task she had undertaken. “Her voice is very fair, but she knows too little of singing, Mrs Roe. She will break down at the first obstacle.”

“She will do no such thing, Mr Rumbell!” rejoined Mrs Roe, with asperity; “she only wants practice to enable her to sing quite as well, if not better, than *that* Mrs Clarence! Besides, you passed your word, remember; to say nothing of the rules. If the printed rules of the society are to be put aside for every stranger who happens to have a tolerable voice, they had better never have been made. Let us keep to them, and then we shall

know what to expect. Otherwise, in saying that I should no longer take any pride in belonging to the society, I know that I speak not only my own opinion, but that of Mrs Prowse, Mrs Allondale, and all the other members of any influence—not excepting Mrs Filmer herself.”

Mr Rumbell grew alarmed. If these women—old women, as they were—chose to join in opposition to himself, and the dean's daughter-in-law seconded the movement, either the Choral Society or his presidentship must go to the wall. And in either case he would incur considerable odium at the hands of the cathedral party.

So, without being the first of his sex who has been over-ruled by circumstances and petticoats, he gave his consent that Miss Grey should be presented to the members as their future soloist; and the evening of which this chapter treats was the one appointed for her introduction. Nelly had heard nothing of all this; she took too little interest in the meetings; and was altogether too insignificant for Mrs Prowse to have considered it worth her while to enlighten her. Besides, she and her party were anticipating with keen delight the surprise and discomfiture of Mrs Clarence's admirers, when the announcement should be made.

As for Miss Filmer, she had no cold at all, but she was so disgusted with the whole proceeding, that she had vowed she would not be present on the occasion; and that if it really took place she should strike her name off the subscribers' list the following morning. But her opinion was as nothing compared to her mother's, to which it was generally opposed. Confused as Nelly's thoughts were, and wandering from the scene before her, she could not help, as soon as she had taken her seat, remarking the various glances of importance, mystery, and congratulation, which were being exchanged between Mrs Roe and her friends, now speculating on the possible identity of the extremely bashful-looking young lady, who, with downcast eyes and burning cheeks, was placed in a prominent position on the sopranos' bench, supported, on either side, by Mrs Prowse and Miss Fanny Clewson.

They were shortly followed by the entrance of Mrs Clarence, who, with her books in her hand, sat quietly down in her accustomed seat. Nelly thought that the president was more fidgety than usual; but as he was always pale and nervous-looking, his discomposure did not make much difference in his appearance.

The practice commenced ; as the orchestra played the last bars of the overture, and the singers rose to be ready for the opening chorus, Mrs Clarence standing a little to the front, as was her wont, the atmosphere seemed to have become suddenly closer to Mr Rumbell, for he drew forth his handkerchief, and wiped his face repeatedly. The final chord came : Mrs Clarence, her eye fixed on his baton, was about to commence her part, when the wand of the leader fell, and he gave a couple of nervous taps with it, to command attention.

"I have a few words to say," he stammered, "before commencing this evening's practice. I am quite sure that we have all been most sensible of the great kindness shown by this lady" (waving his baton towards Mrs Clarence) "in taking our solos, and singing them so ably for us ; still I find"—here Mr Rumbell was again obliged to have recourse to his pocket-handkerchief—"that in accepting her valuable services we have been breaking one of the most stringent rules of our little society ; and broken rules, you know, ladies, sometimes lead to broken heads." Here the president tried to smile with a feeble merriment on the many faces turned towards him, of which he could distinguish but the face of Mrs Clarence, filled with calm surprise.

"It is one of the rules of the Hilstone Choral Society that no resident member shall sing a solo, and we were obliged to make this rule because ladies are known to be so sadly jealous of one another. If the society had been composed of gentlemen only, I don't think we should have needed such a restriction at all."

This witticism was received with great giggling by most of the female members, and Nelly observed that the older the ladies were the more they seemed to giggle. Only Mrs Clarence remained perfectly still, and apparently unmoved.

"We have been obliged to forget all about this rule for the last few weeks, because we were so very anxious to practise 'Haydn's Seasons' for our next concert, but as we have now been sufficiently fortunate as to find a young lady who is a member of our society, and yet non-resident in Hilstone, but who promises to be good enough to come over from Wickley every Wednesday evening, to take our solos for us, why, all I can say is"—here Mr Rumbell's breath seemed to be drawn with considerable difficulty—"all I need say on the part of myself as president, and yourselves as members, of this society, is, that our united and most grateful thanks are due to Mrs Clarence for all the trouble she has taken to oblige us, and"—struggling back to the jocose

strain—"we feel very glad to think that we have now an opportunity of lightening her labours, and giving her a holiday in fact." Then with a little stiff cock-sparrow bow, which was intended to be the personification of ease, Mr Rumbell, as it were, dismissed Mrs Clarence, and continued—

"Miss Grey, who will in future undertake our solos, is kind enough to say that she will commence doing so from to-night."

Mrs Clarence bowed to the president in return for his salutation, but showed no sign of resentment. She did not even resume her seat, but drawing back to a level with the other singers, joined in the chorus as heartily as usual.

Poor Miss Grey, on the contrary, who was now thrust forward by her officious friends, coloured violently, and exhibited all the symptoms of conscious guilt, whilst the music which was being sung in her ears, sounded like an indistinct clang, and her vision became so blurred and dim that she could not distinguish a note in the book she held before her.

The chorus ceased; the assembly waited for her recitative. The girl looked up, and looked down; the tears rushed to her eyes and over her burning cheeks, and she dared not trust her voice alone in the silence which succeeded.

"Now, Miss Grey," said the president waving his baton, as a signal for her note—but no note came.

"Here, dear, perhaps you've lost your place," exclaimed Mrs Prowse, whose patronage was generally accompanied by familiarity. Mrs Roe's hawk-like eye glanced fearfully at her from the other side of the room, whilst her minor upholders smiled compassionately, and murmured, "Poor dear, she feels a little timid at first. I daresay she'll soon get over it, and it's much better than being too bold, in my opinion."

"Try, Miss Grey," urged the president, "it's only fancy, you know; you sing it in a first-rate style when at home, and we are all friends here, remember; make a commencement, and it will be easy enough."

But though his encouragement was backed by all her patronesses, the new candidate for solo honours continued to shake her head mournfully in reply, whilst the tears rolled steadily down her cheeks. She had contracted a nervous mood, and it seemed impossible to her to shake it off.

"What's to be done now?" exclaimed Mr Rumbell, puffing in the style which had so much amused poor Nelly on her first acquaintance with him.

"Give her a glass of port wine," suggested Mr Pratt, the tenor canon.

"And where are we to get port wine from?" was the perturbed answer.

"From my house," said Mrs Roe. "Do run for it, Mr Pratt, it won't take you five minutes. She ought to have had a glass before she came, poor child, but she would not be persuaded, though I pressed her to take it."

So after sundry directions, Mr Pratt set off running to fetch the port wine, and the practice was postponed until his return. Mr Rumbell spent the interval in pacing up and down the room, with vexation portrayed on every feature of his face; whilst the ladies crowded about Miss Grey, who had become slightly hysterical, and was beginning to feel terribly ashamed of herself.

At any other time the whole of this scene would have proved irresistibly comic to the senses of Nelly Monkton, for there was a great deal of fun to be extracted from the faces of Mrs Prowse and Mrs Roe at this dead failure to their enterprise. But the emotion she had herself passed through that afternoon, had left her in the mood to be sympathetic with trouble only, and she thought more of the slight which had been shown to Mrs Clarence, and the misery experienced by Miss Grey, than of the others' discomfiture. As soon as the well-shaken port wine had arrived, a couple of glasses were administered, almost by force, to the unfortunate soloist; and being again supported to her feet, she managed with the energy of despair to falter the notes required of her. But she merely scrambled through her task; her voice was raw and unsympathetic, though not more so than her execution; in fine, she had the sound without the soul, and Nelly thought she had never listened to singing which was more distasteful to her.

The practice was concluded, and the singers began to leave; Miss Grey's admirers again crowded about her, laden with congratulation and encouragement, whilst the poor girl herself seemed only anxious to be permitted to take her departure as quickly as possible, that she might hide her diminished head at Wickley.

Mrs Clarence, having gathered up her music-books, was also crossing the room, when her steps were arrested by the approach of Mr Rumbell.

"I am so sorry—so very sorry—my dear Mrs Clarence, that this should have happened; but I hope you will believe that it is not my fault. I had no alternative. The members have com-

pelled me to keep to the printed rules, in which unfortunately no provision was made for a contingency like the present. But I trust you will not wholly desert us. I trust that we shall still see you here occasionally, and have the aid of your powerful voice and judgment in leading our choruses."

The whole of this address had been delivered in a low tone, for the room was still full of women, eager to gather round and hear what their president had to say to Mrs Clarence. But that lady's answer was intentionally given in a key which rendered it patent to all.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr Rumbell, for your good opinion, but I could not possibly think of infringing the rights of your chosen soloist by interfering with any part of her work. You are aware that I undertook this office entirely at your request, that I told you at the time it was rather against my own wishes than otherwise. No copy of the rules was shown to me; I never heard that there were any until to-night. Had I known of the one you allude to, I should have been the first to advise you to respect it. And had I been aware that the society was governed, not by yourself and your vice-president, but by the ladies of Hilstone, I should have been the last to join it. As it is, you must permit me to withdraw my name from the members' list, and to express my regret that its having been placed there should have been the innocent cause of so much unpleasantness to yourself." And with a general bow to the lingering members, Mrs Clarence shook hands with Mr Rumbell, and left the room.

"And there goes the best voice and the most valuable member that our society has ever been able to boast of," exclaimed the president, wrathfully, as the door closed behind her. "Ladies, I wish you all a very good evening, and I hope you are satisfied with your work. It's more than I am." And with a fearful scowl upon his usually benign countenance, Mr Rumbell also took his departure.

Matters looked almost too serious then for public discussion, and the group dispersing without further gossip, Nelly shortly afterwards found herself on the steps of her own house, shaking hands with, and saying good night to, Mrs Prowse; and totally oblivious of the comments on the evening's proceedings with which that worthy had favoured her all the way home.

As the hall door opened to admit her, and she heard that neither her husband nor her brother had yet returned, she had

but one idea in her mind, that the time had come when she might rest and think.

So she crept up-stairs and into bed ; and laying her throbbing head upon the pillow, closed her eyes, and in imagination reviewed each event of that most eventful day.

CHAPTER XLV.

DR MONKTON'S SENTIMENTS APPEAR TO HAVE UNDERGONE A CHANGE.

BUT even in that hour of acute pain, Nelly was true to herself. She saw everything plainly now ; nothing was undefinable, nothing was hid.

It was as though a curtain had been suddenly withdrawn from before her heart, and all that had appeared foggy and misty in her past life, was rendered clear by its removal. That apparently unreasonable shrinking from marriage for which she had been unable to account, that invisible cord which had seemed to draw her backwards whenever she contemplated such a change, was no longer a mystery to her. Her Cousin Nigel loved her, and had circumstances not intervened to prevent his telling her so, she would have been able to recognise her feelings for him under their true name.

But her own blindness, and their subsequent separation, had rendered this impossible ; and now—it was no use thinking any more about it. She had done that which made any explanation between them futile, and though she had acted, as she imagined, for the best, she felt she had no one but herself to blame for the mistake.

Yet, though her poor little, fevered heart was bent to the earth beneath its load of disappointment and useless regret, she did not once declare, as a more romantic heroine might have done, that the burden was too heavy, and she should sink under it.

She did not even toss and tumble on her bed, and moan that life was over for her ; and thenceforth all she had to look for, was release from it. Nor did she curse the hour when she had met her husband, or her own folly in having married him.

Nelly's chief thought through life had been her brother, and whilst Bertie remained she would never acknowledge that it, or its duties, could be over. And she keenly felt, even during this

first trial of standing face to face with what she had lost, that though an earlier knowledge of her own heart would have prevented her becoming the wife of Dr Monkton, it could not, whilst Bertie cherished his present resentment, have forwarded a marriage with her cousin. So that her chief sorrow was resolved into a generous pity for what Nigel himself might suffer. At this thought the poor girl's courage for a moment did seem to fail; and a little prayer went up to heaven that she might be allowed to bear twice—three times the pain, if their mutual Guardian would but lift the burden off his shoulders.

Her memory flew back to Orpington Chase, and all his kindness to her there, and she wondered she could have been so foolish as not to guess at once how much she loved him. Could she have helped loving him? Did she not remember their interview in the corridor when he kissed her, and how she had wondered afterwards what he could possibly have meant by it? She knew now—she had found it all out when it was too late—and yet she could not feel entirely sorry that it had happened.

Nothing that Bertie had said could influence her thoughts concerning him, however much it might her actions. Even had she not heard Mr Ray's opinion about her brother's prejudice and obstinacy, she knew enough herself to feel that both were exaggerated. And were it not so, the kindness of the son had already wiped from off her loving mind the injury of the father.

Nigel had kissed her, he had called her by terms of endearment. She supposed it would never be so again; but it made her heart less heavy to think of, and her hot hands clasped themselves together as she thanked God for the memory. But then the thought that a memory—an empty, shadowy, unsatisfying memory—was to be her only portion of love in this world, overcame the poor child's heroic gratitude, and she turned her face upon the pillows, and cried quietly to herself.

This patient submission to the inevitable, was entirely in keeping with the conduct of Nelly's whole life. To feel an angry resentment against the will of Heaven, would have been as unnatural to her as to blaspheme her Maker. And yet she suffered none the less because she suffered silently, and would have thought it wrong to refuse any ordinary means by which she might obtain alleviation.

She would gladly have gone to sleep and forgotten her trouble for a while, on the present occasion, but her eyes felt as though they would never close. Soon after midnight she heard her

brother return, and listened to his progress up the stairs, which was accompanied by such an unnecessary amount of noisy talk, that she felt thankful her husband was not at home to find fault with him.

But not until the dawn had broken, was the familiar sound of the doctor's latch-key heard in the door, followed by his entrance to the room which he usually occupied when business had detained him during the greater part of the night. Then, for the first time, the question occurred to Nelly, what should she say to him concerning her interview with Nigel Brooke? She was sadly afraid of the spirit in which both her husband and her brother might receive the news; and her consciousness made her fearful lest, during the recital, she should betray more than she intended of her own feelings regarding it; yet the idea of concealing that she had met her cousin never struck her mind. She knew that she had done no actual wrong in speaking to him, but had she omitted to mention the fact, the burthen of deception would have laid heavily upon her conscience.

So she resolved that she would relate the circumstance upon the first favourable opportunity; and the only stipulation she made with herself was, that the confession should take place when both Dr Monkton and Bertie were present. She felt sure that they would both gladly unite in seizing the opportunity to censure the actions of her cousin and his father and mother; but then she would not have to go through such a scene twice. One good hearty tirade of mutual abuse against the whole family, might surely serve for both of them; and having arrived at this conclusion, Nelly, more wearied by her varied emotions than she had given herself credit for, fell asleep at last, and slumbered heavily till long after her usual hour of rising. Late as it was, however, when she entered the breakfast-room, she found that she was destined to take her meal alone. The doctor was so thoroughly tired from his night's vigil, that he slept till the last moment, and went straight from his bed to his consulting-room; and Bertie, whose small stock of strength was visibly giving way beneath the late hours he insisted upon keeping, was too languid to rise before noon. So that it was not until they met at the luncheon-table, that Nelly had an opportunity of speaking to them both together.

She tried then, by several means, to bring the conversation round to the subject of her walk of the previous day, without success, for Dr Monkton was ruminating on a case which just

then occupied much of his attention, and Bertie, she perceived to her sorrow, appeared no better pleased with her than he had done when they parted. So at last she was obliged to have recourse to plain speaking.

"I took Thug out for a run in the meadows yesterday evening, James," she commenced.

"Did you? it was more than the brute deserved after his behaviour."

"But who do you think I met there?"

"What a stupid question," observed her brother, "when you know every old maid in Hilstone."

"But this wasn't an old maid," she persisted; and then finding that neither of them would try to guess, she added very quickly, "I met Nigel Brooke," and immediately cast her eyes upon her plate, not daring to observe the effect of her intelligence upon her listeners. But it was not so great as she had anticipated.

"What! your cousin from the Chase?" asked her husband.

"That scoundrel!" exclaimed, Bertie, reddening at the mere mention of his name, "does he walk in the meadows? You mustn't go there again, then, Nelly. I won't have you subjected to meeting him; I only wish I had been with you. I would have shown him what I think of him and his doings. Of course you didn't notice him as you passed."

"Of course she did," interposed the doctor, "or I shall be very much displeased with her. Helena knows that I expect my wife to behave like a lady with whomever she is thrown in contact."

"Do you mean to tell me, then," said Robert Brooke, "that you expect my sister to be on terms of courtesy with her cousin, after his infamous behaviour to us?"

"Most certainly I do, not only expect, but desire it."

"Then it must be done without my knowledge," retorted the other fiercely, "for if I saw him presume to bow to her, I'd knock him down for it."

Nelly was so anxious to divert her husband's attention from her brother's unpleasant manner, that she had not even leisure to smile at the absurd threat contained in his words.

"But I had no alternative yesterday, Bertie," she exclaimed.

"I came upon him quite unexpectedly in the lane at the end of the fields, and had no real excuse to make for refusing to exchange a few words with him. You had never forbidden me, James," she added, more timidly, to Dr Monkton, "or I would not have done so."

"I know I have not," he answered, "nor have I any intention of forbidding you. You have my permission, Helena, to speak to your cousin as often as you may meet him.

At this reception—so widely different from what she had anticipated for her news—Nelly looked up in amazement.

But Dr Monkton knew what he was about. The constant visits which his professional rival was called upon to make, on Mrs Brooke's behalf, to Orpington Chase, had caused him of late to think more than ever that he had been very foolish to quarrel with so profitable a patient. It had been all very well, perhaps, at the time, when his wife had yet to be won, and he was enthusiastic in the prosecution of his love-suit; but since he had fairly settled down as a married man, his disagreement with the Brookes of Orpington had assumed a different aspect, and he would have been very pleased to be asked to make it up again. They were the only respectable relations that his wife possessed, and he saw no reason why she should be longer deprived of the benefit of their notice and society. As for the absurd chimeras which her brother had got into his head, concerning the injury they were supposed to have done him, why he must either get rid of them again, or—(and the probability of this alternative had made itself very patent to Dr Monkton during the last few weeks)—he must look out for another home in which to indulge his morbid fancies.

But if Nelly was only astonished at this change in her husband's sentiments, her brother entertained very different feelings concerning it. His face, from having been crimson with excitement, grew pale with passion, and the lips of his delicate, fractious mouth were firmly compressed.

"You give my sister permission to be on friendly terms with Nigel Brooke, Monkton? You who know all the circumstances of the cause which parted us,—who are aware that the hands of his father were stained with the blood of ours, and that I would not allow Nelly even to answer his letters, far less to visit at his house, or hold any communication with him?"

"I am aware that you talk a great deal of nonsense," replied the doctor, angrily, "and that I can manage the affairs of my wife without any help from you. You may choose to quarrel with the only relations of any influence which you possess; but that is no reason that Helena should be forced to follow your example."

"But you quarrelled with them yourself on our account," persisted Robert Brooke, excitedly.

"Pardon me ! I did nothing of the sort," interposed his brother-in-law, totally forgetting how he had once averred to the contrary. "My misunderstanding with Mrs Brooke was purely personal, and one that may be set right any day. I never heard a word of your absurd notions respecting your cousin, until you told me of them yourself. Politeness may at the time have forbidden me to say what I thought of them. But as to carrying them into execution here, it is simply impossible, and whenever I see the opening for a reconciliation between Helena and her aunt, it will assuredly be made."

"But she shall *not* visit at the Chase," exclaimed Robert Brooke, trembling with rage. "As long as I live, my sister shall never clasp hands with the Nigel Brookes, nor acknowledge them as relations. I will not allow it—I will never speak to her again if she does—I will see her *dead* first."

He had risen from his seat during the doctor's speech, and stood supporting himself by the table, and now as he concluded his own, he brought down his fragile hand upon the mahogany with a force which made the purple veins start from beneath the delicate skin.

"Pooh—pooh—pooh !" said Dr Monkton, carelessly. "Sit down again, Robert. You don't know what you are talking about."

At these words, so coolly and contemptuously delivered, the young man became nearly beside himself. Nelly, who had been watching his irritability and her husband's gathering gloom with the greatest anxiety (although from fear of aggravating the quarrel she had abstained from interference), pushed her chair close to Bertie, and laid her hand upon his arm as though she would entreat him to be patient. But he shook it off without paying the least regard to her silent plea.

"Monkton !" he exclaimed, "do you intend to insult me ?"

"I intend you to fully understand that I alone am master in this house," was the rejoinder. "You talk very glibly, young man, of what you will allow '*your sister*' to do, but you seem to forget that your sister is *my wife*."

"I am her nearest relative," said Robert, hotly.

"The accident of birth which makes you so gives you no power whatever over her, under present circumstances. Helena's obedience is due to me alone, and to me alone it will be paid. You have yet to learn that you can have no authority in this house."

At this plain and irrefutable truth, Robert Brooke was visibly

discomposed. He also, of late, had become but too well aware that good feeling alone gave him a claim upon the home which contained his sister. Yet, even this knowledge could not teach him to be prudent, although it made his voice tremble as he replied—

“That may or may not be; but so long as I can prevent it, Nelly shall never be friends with Nigel Brooke. You should be the first yourself, Monkton, to forbid it. If you knew all!”——

Dr Monkton turned round and deliberately fixed his sinister eyes upon the face of Robert Brooke.

“And suppose I do know *all*!” he said, speaking rather slowly. “Suppose I know a great deal more than you had the honour or the honesty to tell me! Suppose I have no higher opinion of you because you tried to keep back half the truth from me!”

At this address, which was incomprehensible to Nelly, she was astonished to see all the excitement fade out of her brother's face, and leave nothing but a weary languor behind. Robert's lips had been parted, and his eyes raised ready to answer any accusation from his brother-in-law; but when Dr Monkton's words were concluded, he appeared to have nothing to say in reply to them, but sank down upon his seat as though exhausted by the effort he had made. His sister passed her arm round him in token of her ready help and sympathy, whilst her husband, rising to leave the room, paused before he did so, to deliver a parting caution.

“Robert Brooke! Let us understand each other. I have said very little as yet about your behaviour since you have been under my roof, although it has in many respects been by no means satisfactory to me. But whilst I rule this establishment, and you remain a member of it, I must beg that you conform in all things to its requirements. We must have no more exhibitions such as that of to-day. If my friends—or my wife's friends—are so objectionable to you, that you cannot meet them with the courtesy of a gentleman, you have the alternative; to go where you will run no risk of offending either them or myself.” And Dr Monkton passed out of the room.

This, then, was the upshot of all Robert's day dreams!—this the realisation of that vision in which Nelly and himself drove proudly by Mrs Brooke of Orpington Chase, without deigning the faintest recognition; this the manner by which they were to prove to their Cousin Nigel that they disdained to accept not only his assistance but his acquaintance! Nelly was desired to notice him whenever they met; and her husband's positive intention was to

bring about a reconciliation between the families as soon as possible. The idea was so mortifying ; it so fully proved his own impotency to convince his hearers of what he believed himself, that Robert Brooke, in mourning his defeat and disappointment, had scarcely any time to wonder at the marvellous change which his brother-in-law's sentiments appeared to have undergone. He realised the first misfortune, indeed, so vividly, that Nelly was shocked to see that tears trickled through the thin fingers with which, as soon as they were alone, he had covered his face.

"Bertie ! Bertie, my darling !" she exclaimed, "pray don't let it worry you like this. There is no need indeed ; James is angry at your setting up your opinion against his, and has said more than he intends to do. He would never dream of bringing Nigel Brooke here, and I do not even think he will have the opportunity, for I heard yesterday that he and Aunt Eliza are going to live in London." And in her alarm and solicitude for her brother, Nelly seemed to have forgotten all that made her own misery in the case. But Bertie refused to be comforted. He had weakened himself so much lately by dissipation, of which his sister, from her enforced separation from him, had little idea, that he had lost even the small amount of command which he had been used to hold over himself, and at this total upset of his unworthy ambition he had completely broken down.

"Promise me, Nell !" he said, whilst she was clinging about his neck and kissing away the tears which she blushed to see upon his face. "*Swear* to me, that you will never speak to Nigel Brooke or to his mother unless you are compelled to do so ; and that if Monkton forces you into their company, you will refuse to say or do more than the most formal civility obliges."

But this promise Nelly hesitated to give.

She loved Bertie as herself ; but the experience of the day before had forced her to acknowledge that her affection for him had at last a rival, which claimed at all events to have the power to make her quite as miserable as its predecessor had sometimes done.

So, without losing her hold of her brother, she only whispered—

"I can't promise that, darling ; it would be foolish and useless for me to do so ; for if James desires a thing, you know that I must obey him, or it would be the worse for both of us."

She had never hinted so much to Bertie before of the power her husband held over her, through him. But he was in no mood to be reasonable or reasoned with.

As his sister's refusal left her lips, he pushed her roughly away from him.

"So you are against me also," he bitterly complained. "I might have guessed as much. You have always had a lurking fondness for Nigel Brooke and his mother, Nelly, and have never fully agreed with me as to the indelible injury for which we are indebted to them. So I have no doubt this determination of Monkton's meets with your entire approval, and that you will do all in your power to make him keep to it, and that another month will see you as thick as ever at the Chase."

Conscious that much of what her brother said was true, Nelly blushed deeply at his accusation ; but she was perfectly sincere when she replied—

"I promise you to do nothing, Bertie, to further a meeting between myself and the Nigel Brookes. I may not have thought entirely as you have in the matter, but you will acknowledge that I have never acted against your wishes in any particular, and, if I had no inclination to do so before, I have still less now. Indeed ! I am in earnest," she continued, sadly, as her brother turned round to gather from her open face if she were speaking her real mind ; "I have no wish to see an intimacy formed again between us : I should try to prevent it, if it were likely, for I think it would be the worst thing that could happen for us all."

"I suppose you're telling the truth," said Bertie, incredulously ; "but after what Monkton said to-day, I feel as if I should never trust any one again."

"Not *me*, darling, oh ! don't say that of me," she exclaimed, in a burst of distress at the mere supposition ; "I have always been true to you, Bertie, you know I have, and shall remain so till I die." And in her endeavours to sooth her brother's fears and restore his good opinion of herself, Nelly quite forgot to ask him to what her husband could have possibly alluded, when he hinted that he knew more about the wretched business which had been the cause of so much trouble to them all than Bertie had had the honesty to tell him.

CHAPTER XLVI.

OLD AGGIE BECOMES COMMUNICATIVE.

It was on a chilly afternoon in the commencement of November, some little time after the occurrence related in the preceding

chapter, that Nelly was alone in her dressing-room. She was idle—a fact of no mean significance—that is, her fingers were unemployed, although her brain was busy enough, as having drawn her low chair close to the fire, she sat with her head on her hand, staring into its glowing embers. Many things had occurred during the last few weeks to vex and alarm her. Since the quarrel which they had had regarding Nigel Brooke, words had more than once arisen between Bertie and his brother-in-law, until Dr Monkton's customary behaviour had grown to be curt and authoritative, and the younger man's either sullen or defiant. And added to this, her outward existence had become more spiritless and dull. Hilstone was not a lively place at the best of times; and autumn was its most stagnant season. There was positively no out-door distraction for Nelly except the Choral Society practices, and since Laura Filmer had withdrawn her name from the subscribers' list they were less interesting than they had ever been.

It was a great and most unfortunate change for a country-bred girl, who had been used to run about as she liked, and to have her own way in everything. All the freedom of the dear old life at Bickton was gone for ever, for Mrs Prowse had even managed of late to discover that walking by herself was a most improper practice for her sister-in-law to indulge in, and brought so many rumours to St Bartholomew's Street of ladies having been insulted, robbed, and frightened when met in the fields alone, that Nelly was strictly forbidden to go there without the protection of a companion. She had heard, and almost with relief, that the tenants of Orpington Chase had taken their departure for London, since it allayed the fear of her husband striving to regain an entrance for her there, and she had hoped also that the chance of meeting her cousin in her daily walks once removed, she should have less difficulty in erasing his image from her memory.

But this hope Nelly had already proved to be a false one. It seemed harder to forget him now that a distance of so many miles was between them: and she found that, added to her former regret, there had sprung up a lively fear, lest amid the attractions and distractions of a town life, her cousin should learn to forget *her*; though to what end he should remember her, she could not satisfy herself. But her chief cause of anxiety still continued to be her brother. *She* had fallen very submissively into the dull routine of life in a country town; but Bertie was as discontented as ever, and never putting any restraint on his tongue for

prudence sake, openly abused Hilstone and its inhabitants both before the doctor and his sister. And the prospect was growing darker every day, and Nelly felt that all her spirit was fading out of her with the sunshine of the year.

As she was thus sadly ruminating, a knock sounded on her door, and old Aggie's head was thrust into her dressing-room.

"Do Thug happen to be with you, Miss Nelly, my dear?" she inquired, "for Master Robert's been asking after him for the last hour, and I can't see him nowhere."

The old nurse had never been able to tune her tongue to address her nurseling by any other than her maiden name, and Nelly would not have had her alter it for all the world.

"No! he is not, nurse!" she exclaimed, starting from her reverie, "and now I come to think of it, I have not seen the dear old dog since luncheon-time. I wonder where he can be. Perhaps I shut him in the dining-room; do go down and see."

Aggie hobbled away, and Nelly waited anxiously for the sound of her favourite's bark, the token of his release; for times were altering for poor Thug almost as much as for herself. The doctor seldom greeted him now except with a complaint or a kick; and two days before, he had, for some fancied offence, subjected him to a regular thrashing, the first indignity of the sort the mastiff had ever received, but which, to Nelly's extreme surprise, Thug hardly resented, as she had imagined that he would; although from his unusually craven bearing since, he did not seem to have forgotten it. Since which, she had been more than usually careful lest the dog should be any cause of annoyance, and had almost made up her mind that for his own sake, his liberty must be curtailed, and she must try and reconcile him to the occupation of a kennel. Yet, former experience made her very loath to adopt this measure until there was no alternative.

She heard old Aggie limp down-stairs, and open the dining-room door, but no Thug bounded to answer her summons; upon which she descended to the kitchen regions, where she remained longer than suited her mistress's impatience, and when she again made her appearance, Nelly met her at the head of the stairs.

"Well, where is he, Aggie?"

"He ain't nowhere about, my dear, not as I can see."

"But don't the servants know where he is?" demanded Nelly in surprise. "Perhaps he went out with the carriage."

The nurse had reached the landing by this time, and she put

her hard, wrinkled hand on the girl's rounded shoulder, and pressed her to re-enter the dressing-room.

"He's all safe, Miss Nelly; don't you be afraid for him: but I've had it in my mind to speak to you for several days past, and there's no time like the present. So if you be at leisure, my dear, I'll come in and sit a bit with you, now."

"Come in, nurse, by all means!" said Nelly, though half afraid of what she might have to listen to; "it wants an hour to the dressing-bell yet, and it's a long time since you and I have had a talk together."

Old Aggie, who had always been a privileged nuisance with her young mistress, was, as may readily be imagined, still more so now. She had given up a great deal in leaving her quiet little village, and following the fortunes of the brother and sister, and she would have done so for no one less dear to her than Nelly was. She was a most faithful attendant on Bertie, notwithstanding her increasing age and infirmities; and Nelly would have suffered twice as much in being separated from her brother, if she had not felt that he had his nurse with him to supply her place. Poor old Aggie had felt very strange and uncomfortable when she first found herself placed in the midst of half-a-dozen modern servants, who ridiculed her for the punctilious manner in which she discharged all her duties, and spoke of her employers behind their backs. But her real worth had caused all such little unpleasantnesses, after a while, to melt away, and give place to the respect which she deserved. Still she always averred that she only stayed in Hilstone for the sake of "her child," and that if anything happened to Miss Nelly, she should be the first to go back to Little Bickton, and leave Master Robert to shift for himself,—“as he deserved,” she would add, indignantly. But Aggie never ventured to hint at such a contingency to Master Robert's sister, for her nurse was the last remnant of Bickton life which remained to Nelly, and she would have been miserable if she had thought it possible that they could ever be separated again.

When they had entered the dressing-room on the present occasion, and Aggie (after having carefully ascertained that no listener lurked in the adjoining apartment) had closed both the doors leading to that and to the passage, she took a chair close to her mistress, and bent her face down to hers.

"Miss Nelly, my dear!" she commenced, in the husky whisper of old age, "what I want to speak to you about is Master

Robert—he's laying very heavy on my mind, my dear; and I can't feel it right to keep it to myself no longer."

Nelly had little idea but that the woman was going to tell her—what, to her grief, she knew already—that her brother kept hours most unfitted both to his health and respectability; but as she had no hope that discussing the fact would remedy it, she tried to evade the subject by saying lightly, though with a heightened colour—

"Why, nurse, I thought your communication was to concern Thug—at all events, tell me where the dear old dog is."

"I don't think Thug is of much consequence compared to the other," replied old Aggie, "but it's part of my story, anyhow. The dog's been took behind the stables, Miss Nelly, by the doctor's orders, and tied up along with them nasty, hungry-looking greyhounds, and it's all Master Robert's doing—every bit of it."

Nelly turned quite pale.

"But how is that?" she exclaimed.

"Why, it seems when Master Robert came in last night, he caught sight of Mrs Prowse's cloak, which she had left behind her in the afternoon, a-hanging up in the hall, and what should he go for to do, but to tie it round that dog's neck, and send him to sleep on the landing here, with the hood right over his head!"

"Oh! how inconsiderate! how thoughtless!" cried Nelly; "and when I am always begging Bertie to be more careful about offending Mrs Prowse! But why didn't you take it off again, nurse?"

"My dear!" said the old woman, solemnly, "do you think, if I had gone for to see it, that I wouldn't have took it off again? But I was in the bedroom, and never heard nothing of it till this moment. And when the doctor come in, which he didn't do till quite early this morning, and see the dog lying there, with the cloak wrapped under and over him, Mr Long says his oaths was something awful; and he ordered him to chain him up behind the stable as soon as ever a place could be made ready for him. And the carpenter's been a knocking up a kennel all the morning."

"And he never told *me*," said Nelly, almost forgetting, in her distress, to whom she was speaking; "how unkind! He might have known it was not *my* fault."

"My dear! the doctor's not a gentleman to speak all that's on his mind, remember! Most like he forgot the order as soon as he had given it!"

"But what can Bertie have been thinking of?" exclaimed

Nelly, eager to change the subject from her husband's indifference to her feelings; "what on earth could make him play so silly a trick, and one which he must have known would get the poor dog into a scrape? He pretends to be so fond of Thug, and yet he does all he can to render him a cause of annoyance!"

"Ah! Miss Nelly! that just brings me to what I feel I must speak to you about. Neither Master Robert's ways, my dear, nor his doings, are such as they ought to be, and if he don't stop them, they'll bring him to great trouble before long."

"Are you alluding to his health, nurse? I know his cough is very troublesome, poor darling! But this weather is so much against him."

"His cough is bad, Miss Nelly, sure enough, but he makes it a deal worse than he need—not a drop of the mixture can I persuade him to take, either by day or by night. He won't do nothing without you, my dear; and now that you ain't about him so much as you used to be, I might as well speak to that there table. I'm sure it's little rest I get at night, now-a-days, and it's little rest he can get himself, either, poor lad—for if I'm wore out with the constant noise of his coughing, what must he be with the exertion!"

Nelly's answering sigh came from the bottom of her heart. She had known all this before, and had pondered and wept over it without finding any possible remedy. Bertie was obstinate; so was her husband; and between the two she could do nothing!

"But that ain't the worst of it, Miss Nelly, by a long deal," continued old Aggie.

"What *can* be worse," said Nelly. "He'll kill himself if he will not listen to reason."

"He's going a much shorter way to do that, my dear, than by refusing all the medicine in the world."

"What do you mean, nurse?" exclaimed the girl, suddenly turning to the old woman and seizing her arm. "Oh! what *do* you mean? tell me quickly."

"Miss Nelly, my bird! do you remember the night at Bickton Farm, before you writ to tell the doctor as you'd take him?" said Aggie, gazing steadily at the eager face upturned to hers, whilst she fondly stroked the hand which had grasped her own. The bright flush of excitement which had mounted to Nelly's cheeks receded from them little by little, leaving a deadly pallor behind it. Remember it!—ah! did she not?—the unsteady gait, the horrid sickly leer, the unintelligible babble, which had so shocked and frightened her! She read the truth at once in

Aggie's compassionate glance, and closing her eyes as though she would shut out sense and feeling, Nelly leaned back in silence on her chair. The old woman, alarmed at her appearance, scrambled up from her seat, and procuring a bottle of eau-de-cologne from the dressing-table, poured it plentifully over her mistress's face and hands.

"That will do, nurse," said Nelly, quietly, as the fragrant scent ran down her neck and bosom; "don't be frightened; I never faint, you know, and I feel all right again now, and able to listen to what you have to say. But"—with an effort to restrain her emotion—"pray be quick about it."

"There ain't much more to tell, my dearie," resumed the nurse. "I wish I had been dead before I had to tell it, but I feel you ought to know. As it was then, Miss Nelly, so it is now; and not once, but almost every night in the week. You don't see it, my dear, because he lies late of a morning, and you're in bed before he returns of a night; but all the servants know it for a truth. Why, he's just as often carried up them stairs as he walks them, Miss Nelly. And that will account to you for all his tricks, for half the times he knows no more what he's doing than the babe unborn."

Nelly recalled with a shudder the various noises to which she had so often listened on Bertie's return, without guessing the cause; and from shame and vexation combined, she began to cry.

"Now, don't you do that, Miss Nelly!" urged the old nurse; "it can't do him no manner of good, you know, and it may do yourself some harm. But, as you must perceive, such habits is quite sufficient to ruin any one's health, let alone a sickly creature like Master Robert. Why, at this rate, his life won't be worth a day's purchase soon."

"But where does he get it, nurse?—where does he get the stuff which makes him in that horrid state?" asked Nelly, with averted eyes and burning cheeks.

"Lor', my dear, in a town like this he can get it in a dozen places. He didn't find no difficulty remember, even at Bickton; and when a man's once set upon that course he'd find a tap in the sandy desert. It isn't my usual way you know, Miss Nelly—to speak of the concerns of my betters—I've been reared very different from that; but I thought it was my duty, when I see how Master Robert was going on, just to ask John where he mostly wheels him to of an evening. And it seems that his favourite

place is the 'Feathers,' where they keep a billiard-table unknown ; and where, if he's ever likely to fall in company with a gentleman, 'tain't with such a one as you would like to see your brother making friends with, nor as the doctor would be pleased to hear that he even knew. And John says that he's there regular for two or three hours almost every night, and that when he ain't fit to walk, they sends him home in a fly or a chair. And a pretty lot of his money, I'll lay, they've took from him before now."

"Aggie," exclaimed Nelly, horror-struck at the woman's recital, "what can I do ? what can I say to convince Bertie that he is ruining himself ?"

"I don't see that it will be any manner of use your speaking to him, Miss Nelly. Most likely it will only aggravate him to do worse. He ain't a pliable nature, Master Robert, nor never were. From a baby the only way to get him to do anything, was to beg of him not."

"But it *must* be put a stop to," said Nelly ; "I should never forgive myself if I did not try, Aggie ! I will speak to him at once," and she rose as if for the purpose. But the nurse detained her.

"Speak to the doctor, my dear, that's your only plan. Nothing else won't do no good."

"To Dr Monkton," exclaimed the girl in alarm, "oh ! no, Aggie, he would be so angry, he would never forgive him ; and then Bertie and he might come to words about it, and there is no saying how it would end."

"Angry about it, Miss Nelly ? In course he would ; 'twould be a marvel indeed, otherwise. But that's just what may be the saving of Master Robert. Your speaking won't do no good. You'll kiss him and cry over him, and beg him for his own sake and your'n to be more steady, and he'll swear to all you ask him, and be just the same two days afterwards. But let the doctor, as has the real authority in this house, tell him as he won't stand it no longer from him, and it'll make all the difference in the world. Now, do try it, my dear. Go to your husband on the first opportunity, and tell him how Master Robert's going on, and beg of him to save his health and his life for you. The doctor won't refuse you nothing, my bird. He loves you too much surely, to wish to see you unhappy. Lor', lor', what a deal you've gone through in your short life," continued the old woman as Nelly's face was hidden in her lap, "he's a'most wore you out, my bless-

ing, with his whims and his ways, but there's a reward for you up above, never fear. And there'll be a reward for you here below too, if I don't mistake; for 'tis morally impossible that any one with a human heart could stand out for ever against such patient love as your'n."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THUG SLEEPS ON THE LANDING FOR THE LAST TIME.

BUT notwithstanding all her nurse's persuasions to the contrary, Nelly could not make up her mind to ask the advice of her husband on the subject of Bertie's delinquencies. She knew at once too little of him, and too much! Too little, when that sweet familiarity and perfect confidence which ought to exist between persons connected by so close a tie are taken into consideration, and too much as regarded his undisguised antipathy towards her brother.

But to put in a word of entreaty for poor Thug was an easier task. In her horror and shame at the distressing news which Aggie had told her about Bertie, Nelly had almost lost sight of the annoyance which she would otherwise have felt at her favourite being put in durance for his sake. But in reality, it was no small trouble to her. She was fresh and childlike in most of her feelings, and she loved the dog as only girls before the cares of maternity come upon them, can love the animals which they have reared for themselves. From the hour when he had been first presented to her, a little blind puppy with a very wide mouth, the mastiff had been her constant companion and friend. To him she had confided, very foolishly no doubt, everything which either gave her pain or pleasure, but as amongst his other virtues Thug did not possess the faculty of repetition, his mistress might perhaps have chosen her confidant less wisely. Throughout his existence of seven years' duration, a short space enough to the man of middle-age, but a considerable item when deducted from Nelly's nineteen summers, her dog and she had never been separated, except on that memorable occasion when she left her home for Orpington Chase. From his whining puppyhood, when she would proudly take him out for a run upon the common, and losing the scent and sound of her advancing footsteps, he would throw his little head into the air and turn round and round in yapping helpless-

ness until she ran back to pick him up again ; throughout his romping, rollicking youth, and the sedate though not less rough attentions of his maturity, Thug and his mistress had been the most inseparable of allies. He had always accompanied her in her walks, sat beside her at her meals, and lain snoring outside her bedroom door at night. He had been reared so tenderly, and treated so well, that he hardly knew the meaning of correction, and a chain and collar were immediate signals for his rebellion. Nelly knew this perfectly, and the idea of what the animal must be suffering tied up amongst strangers, and in a strange place, worried her greatly ; and, added to which, Thug had not been well during the previous week. He had never thrown out the distemper so decidedly as to be unmistakably such ; and she had more than once remarked lately, from his heavy drooping look and loss of appetite, that she feared he was going to take to baby disorders in his old age. Every now and then, during the pauses in the meal which was just past, a long mournful howl, too far off to be distinctly heard, but quite near enough to catch her listening ear, had nearly driven the tears into her eyes ; and when, after dinner, she found herself alone with her husband, her anxiety for Thug's restoration to his good graces overcame the natural timidity which she felt on approaching so dangerous a subject.

Bertie—with whom the dog was almost as great a favourite as with his sister—had evidently learned the reason of his disappearance, for he had scarcely opened his lips all dinner-time ; but Dr Monkton, who had, as old Aggie surmised, “most-like forgot the order” as soon as he had given it, was much the same in manner as usual. But evidently some very unpleasant recollection attached to the circumstance, for as soon as Nelly mentioned the dog's name, his brow clouded over, and his face assumed a look of the greatest determination.

“James !” she commenced hurriedly, “I have missed poor old Thug so this afternoon.”

She was sitting under the lamp-light, engaged in needlework. She did not go and throw herself down by the side of her husband, as on a former occasion, for since she had arrived at a more perfect knowledge of her heart, Nelly had felt a shrinking from him which she had tried in vain to overcome. Any chance of her loving him had been nipped in the bud long before ; but now, even her unreserve shrunk abashed into a corner, as though merely to show itself mere deception. When she had ventured to make her remark she glanced up fearfully, to see how it had been taken.

Dr Monkton was standing by the mantelpiece, and frowning terribly.

"You must learn to do without him, anyhow, Helena, for I have no intention of setting him at liberty again."

The work dropped from her hands upon the table.

"Oh! not really, James? You are not in earnest? If he is not let loose to sleep in the house as usual, he will howl so dreadfully all night, and I shall lie awake and listen to him."

"If that is the case," replied the doctor, coolly, "he must be muzzled."

"But he will be frantic, James! He will go mad. Thug has never been used to any restraint in his life."

"Then it is high time he became used to it," replied Dr Monkton. "A mastiff is not a proper dog for the house; he is not even a safe dog to keep loose about the premises."

"He has never hurt any one since he was born," said Nelly, mournfully, "and he will fret so dreadfully, away from Bertie and me. Just hear how he is howling at this moment! O James! *do* let him loose. He shall never come into the sitting-rooms nor annoy you in any way, if you will but let him stay here as he used to do. He will die if he is always kept chained up to a kennel."

At the idea of a powerful brute like Thug dying of a chain and collar, Dr Monkton laughed immoderately.

"You don't know what nonsense you are talking, Helena! However, if being kept in his proper place is to prove the death of Thug, I am afraid he must be sacrificed, for he will never take up his abode in this house again. I am tired of having my property and that of my friends destroyed by an animal."

"But that wasn't Thug's fault," exclaimed Nelly, almost forgetting whose it was in her anxiety to defend her favourite.

"Perhaps so," returned her husband; "but it is not the first time that he has been made the means of annoyance to my friends, and a direct defiance of my own orders. Your brother has done all he can to upset the peace and regularity of this household, Helena; but I have at all events removed one temptation out of his reach. He will no longer have Thug to practise any of his drunken tricks upon. We shall see what method he next adopts of exhibiting his gentlemanly behaviour and feelings."

At this avowal that her husband was aware of what she had trusted he was in ignorance, Nelly grew so alarmed that she had no further anxiety to waste upon poor Thug. She clasped her

hands together and looked up into his face imploringly as she exclaimed—

“O James ! I never heard of it until to-day—I had no idea of such a thing until old Aggie told me. And she says that poor Bertie coughs so dreadfully all night that she can get no rest for listening to him.”

“I know he does,” replied the doctor, totally unmoved, as he drew a toothpick from its case, and commenced to use it.

“And it is worse—so much worse than it used to be.”

“I know it is,” he repeated, as indifferently as before.

“But, James ! he will *kill* himself if he goes on like this.”

“Of course he will,” replied Dr Monkton, still busily employed upon his teeth.

Nelly gazed at him for a moment, as if it were impossible that he could be in earnest, and then, as she marked the cold, sarcastic, unchanged expression of his face, she sprang at him, as though she had gone wild, and shook him by the arm.

“James ! James ! for God’s sake, don’t look at me like that ! Say that you will save him ! tell me that you will do all in your power to restore him to health, and break him off these dreadful habits ! You *can* do it ! You know you can do it if you try ! It is but such a little while that he has taken to them ; surely it will not be so difficult to win him back again ! My speaking is of no avail, but he will listen to you if you reason with him kindly. Oh ! James, say that you will talk to him, for my sake !”

But Dr Monkton, once bent upon a thing, was not the man to be moved by a woman’s tearful entreaties. He quietly disengaged himself from the excited grasp of his wife’s hand, and resumed the operation with which she had interfered.

“I intend to speak to him,” he replied, “and very decidedly ; but I have no such hopes of the result as you appear to entertain ; and as to his cough, it has gone too far. Medicine may alleviate it, perhaps, but nothing will stop it until his breath is stopped altogether.”

She had relinquished her hold of him, and sunk down into her former place, and when his cruel words were ended, nothing was to be heard in the room but the sound of her quiet sobbing.

Sympathising so little with the cause, the sight of Nelly’s grief had no power to move Dr Monkton, and after the silence of a few minutes, he deliberately wiped his toothpick, replaced it in its case ; and left the room, and when he had adjusted his

greatcoat in the hall, she heard him quit the house. For a long time she remained there, with her face buried in her hands, considering what was best to be done. One thing was evident, she must act alone ; it was useless, at all events in his present mood, to look for aid or advice to her husband.

And the danger was imminent ; there was no time to be lost ; she must see and speak with Bertie before he had an interview with Dr Monkton, that she might implore him, for both their sakes, to be patient and forbearing, and not bring his disagreement with his brother-in-law to an open rupture.

As the thought struck her, she rose to seek him, lest by any chance he might be in his own room ; but, as usual, he was absent. Than Nelly's mind, distracted for the moment from the work she had in hand, reverted to her dog, and wrapping a warm cloak about her shoulders, with the hood over her head, she ventured out upon a visit to the stables. The grooms and coachman, who were snugly enjoying their pipes and newspapers by a fire in the harness-room, were quite startled by the sudden appearance of their young mistress, until they heard the errand on which she had come. But they all knew how she loved her dog, and had been proportionately indignant at receiving orders to tie him up. The coachman himself volunteered to guide her to the mastiff's kennel, and through the damp and dirt of the outbuildings Nelly followed him gladly, in hopes of carrying some comfort to her disconsolate Thug.

"He ain't 'owled 'alf so much, ma'am, the last hour or so," remarked the coachman, who instinctively felt that his lady required a little cheering on the subject. "It don't come natural to him to be tied up just at first, I daresay, but he'll get used to it by and by, ma'am, as you'll see, and enjoy his runs all the more for not having been loose all day. There's the kennel, ma'am, I had it placed very snug and dry, knowing he'd been so pampered ; so he won't come to no harm of wet or cold. Here ! Thug, Thug ! old fellow !" and the coachman whistled, and Nelly called, and then the stable lantern, which the former carried, was turned upon the kennel, and to their surprise it was empty.

"Well, now, that's strange !" said the man. "He can't have broke away, for here's the chain and collar, and yet I never hear no one about the place this evening. But master, he come to the stables before he went out, ma'am, to give his orders concerning the horses, and I shouldn't at all wonder if he

took it in his mind to give the dog a run. Any way, he can't be lost."

Nelly was not at all afraid of this herself ; she even thought it might be as the coachman had suggested ; and hoping that if her husband proved better than his word in one instance, he might do so in the other, she hurried back to the house. Contrary to her customary obedience, and notwithstanding Aggie's evident desire to get her into bed, she sat up till twelve o'clock that night, in hopes of seeing and speaking with her brother ; but when the hour struck without having brought him home, fear lest her husband should be the first to return, made her comply with the nurse's entreaties, that she would at least disencumber herself of her apparel. But two minutes afterwards she repented her tardy acquiescence, for hardly was she robed in her dressing-gown, before the stoppage of a fly at the front door, and the subsequent sound of Bertie's voice in the hall, told her that what she had waited for was at hand.

Old Aggie left her to receive her master, and Nelly stood with the door of her dressing-room just unclosed, ready to call to her brother as soon as he should have reached the landing ; but what was her chagrin and disappointment when his slow progress upstairs was accomplished, to see that he was accompanied by both Long and the footman, and that it evidently was as much as they could do to persuade him to go quietly to his bed ; and following close upon his footsteps, not with his usual impetuous rush, but inertly and heavily, she saw to her amazement—Thug !

Bertie appeared in the highest spirits. By the lamp on the landing, and the candle carried by the nurse, Nelly could perceive that the flush on his delicate face, the false brilliance in his eyes, and the careless manner in which his hair was tossed back from his forehead, gave him a debonnair air, which, whilst it struck a chill to her heart, was infinitely becoming to himself. He looked so handsome, as he stood at the head of the stairs, alternately joking with the men-servants and abusing the poor old nurse for begging him to come into his bedroom, and she felt him to be so very dear, that it was as much as she could do to refrain from leaving her room, and joining her entreaties to those of his attendants ; but she trusted every moment that Aggie's persuasion might prove successful, and that the men might go away again, and leave her at liberty to do as she chose.

But the next minute she perceived that the difficulty lay in the

fact that Bertie would not permit Long to take the mastiff back again to the stables.

"The dog sleeps *here*," he said, authoritatively. "He has always done so, and I will not permit him to be removed. Here Thug! my good fellow! there's your bed!" and he pulled a fluffy sheepskin mat from before the door of Dr Monkton's dressing-room, and threw it down in the centre of the landing; and upon which Thug, in the same heavy, drooping manner, immediately ensconced himself.

But the servants evidently foresaw what Nelly had at once realised, that this fresh act of rebellion would be the cause of an aggravated quarrel between the doctor and his brother-in-law, and endeavoured all they dared to dissuade the young man from persisting in his determination.

"Now, Mr Brooke," said Long, speaking as though he addressed an obstinate child, "do let me take the animal down again. He'll lie just as comfortable in his kennel as here, you know; and the doctor will blame me perhaps, if he finds him on the landing again."

"Blame you!" loudly exclaimed Bertie; "and what if he does? If he blames you, give him warning,—that's my advice. Don't stand his nonsense any more than I do. As to that dog, he belongs to me, and not to the doctor. He may tie up his own mangy hounds as much as he likes, and himself too, into the bargain; but he sha'n't tie up my mastiff, and if he's bent upon it, let him do it himself,—ha! ha! Let him come up here with a chain and a collar, and lay a finger upon Thug when I've once told him to lie still,—ha! ha! He'll see what he'll get for his pains. Your doctor won't cure himself in a hurry after that,—ha! ha!"

At this most thoughtless speech the men grinned, as servants will when their superiors lower themselves for their amusement. The old nurse in vain put in her feeble warnings, and Nelly shrunk behind the door, deeply ashamed for her brother, and fearful lest she should be known to have overheard him.

"But we could bring him up the first thing in the morning, sir," urged the footman, anxious only to get the dog away until his owner should have recovered his senses. "They'll be wondering what's become of him down at the stables, and coming up here, maybe, to inquire. Better let him go back for to-night, sir."

But Robert Brooke was not to be persuaded; he swore with an oath such as his sister had never heard proceed from his mouth before, that the mastiff should pass the night on that rug,

and nowhere else ; and that if the doctor saw him there, all the better,—it was just what he wished and intended him to do.

“Bertie ! Bertie, dearest ! let him go,” exclaimed Nelly, at this juncture, forgetting everything but the dread of her husband’s anger.

“Holloa ! my darling, are you there ?” replied Bertie, all his real feeling for her bubbling to the surface in the unguarded state into which he had thrown himself. “You won’t have old Thug kicked out on a night like this, Nelly dear, will you ?”

“Let him go, dear Bertie ; pray, let him go, I implore you,” she said, retreating behind the door as her brother staggered up against it.

“You faithless vixen !” he exclaimed, “have *you* gone over to the Philistines ? Old Thug won’t thank you for your advice, Nell. Why, where are you hiding yourself ? Come out of that !” and with a rude effort, he pushed the door wide open.

By that time Nelly was in the centre of the room, but the men-servants, thinking that the scene was best without a witness, after one or two ineffectual attempts to coax Thug to follow them, went down-stairs again, leaving Robert Brooke alone with the women.

Nelly saw, of course, that it would be useless attempting to speak to her brother that night upon the subject which occupied her mind. All she could do was, by coaxing, entreaty, and numberless caresses, to induce him, as soon as might be, to retire to his bed. But the task was by no means an easy or a speedy one. Poor Bertie happened to be in a very loving mood, and Nelly had missed his old tenderness so grievously of late, that she had not the heart to cut his little grateful and repentant speeches short. But as soon as she had persuaded him (by many a promise not to quit his side until he should be fast asleep) to lie down, and having watched him fall off into a heavy slumber, had gently disengaged her hand from his clasp, she hurried again upon the landing. All her thought now was, how to get rid of Thug before her husband returned. The dog was sleeping, as she imagined, upon the rug which Bertie had thrown to him ; but when, with the candle in her hand, she stooped to pat his head, she saw that his eyes were open.

“I am sure that Thug is not well,” she remarked to Aggie, who was close behind her ; “just see how dull his eyes are, nurse, and his nose is as hot as fire. Poor old dear, it’s a shame to turn you out again when you have made yourself so comfortable, but

I dare not let you stay. Come, Thug, old man, get up, don't be so lazy. Come, get up, old fellow," and she pushed the animal's sides with the intention of urging him to rise. But Thug, usually so lively, seemed this night to be either very indolent or very sulky. His heavy eyes followed the light of the candle which she carried in a remarkable manner; but he showed no other sign of recognition, although Nelly laid her soft cheek against his forehead in her distress at his obstinacy and apparent illness.

"Aggie!" she exclaimed, "this must not be. Dr Monkton will return home soon, and must not find Thug here. It will make him so angry. Do go down-stairs and beg either Long or John to bring up a chain and collar."

"Lor, my deary, do you know what time it is? It's past two, and they must have been a-bed long ago. And who will be up to receive the dog in the stables either, at this time in the morning? No one; and it would be unreasonable to expect it. No, Miss Nelly, it's unfortunate as the animal's here again, but it's just part and parcel of Master Robert's tricks, and as it is so, best let him bide till daylight; very like the doctor won't be home at all till morning, for Mr Long says as he's gone right into the country, and I'll be stirring the first thing, my dear, and engage to take Thug back to the kennel myself. So the best thing you can do is, to get a wink of sleep, for you must be rarely tired."

And so Nelly—having no better suggestion to make herself—yielded to old Aggie's persuasion; and after a vain endeavour to withdraw the fluffy mat from beneath Thug's carcase, for which he saluted her, to her amazement, with a low growl, she submitted to being tucked up in her own bed, where, after a while, fatigue overcoming her grief and anxiety, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DR MONKTON'S REVENGE.

WHEN Dr Monkton left the house that evening it was with no thought of enmity against his wife. That she should plead for the restoration of her favourite's liberty, and try to find excuses for her brother's misconduct, was but natural; and however little sympathy her husband felt in her distress, he could not, in common justice, be angry with her for it. But with regard to Robert Brooke, he entertained very different feelings, and, as he told Nelly, had

fully made up his mind to speak to him with decision; the fact being, that he had never really contemplated his brother-in-law taking up a permanent residence in his house. It had been very convenient to tell his wife so in the days of his courtship, when any idea to the contrary would have frightened her away from him; but he had known from the commencement that it was a plan which could never be either lasting or successful, and he felt that the time had already come when it should be changed. One of his own proposals at the period of his marriage (and which, although he but desired it in furtherance of the event now contemplated, had made poor Nelly consider him the most generous of men) had been, that the two thousand pounds left to the twins by their grandfather should be settled upon the brother alone, so that he might feel himself to be independent of his sister. And as Dr Monkton had agreed to settle double that sum upon his intended wife, Mr Ray had eagerly assented to the proposition, and thought with Nelly that it was a most satisfactory proof of the doctor's honourable intentions towards them both.

But this very act of generosity now rendered the way clear for the ejection of his brother-in-law.

Robert Brooke could not complain that he was thrust forth helpless and penniless upon the world: he had an income of his own to spend as he thought fit, and the sooner he killed himself with it the better, so Dr Monkton inwardly decided. He was weary of the continued opposition shown to his wishes by his wife's brother; weary of hearing the tales repeated against him by Mrs Prowse, and of the discredit he was bringing upon his name and establishment by repeated acts of folly and drunkenness.

He felt no disposition to remonstrate and argue with him as Nelly had entreated him to do: had he done so, and thereby worked a change, he would have regretted his forbearance; for he was sick of Robert Brooke, and only wanted to get rid of him altogether. He thought that his wife would be more his own when her brother was out of the way; that she would be more interested in his affairs, more affectionate towards himself; more submissive, even he acknowledged, she could not be.

What Nelly would feel at the proposed change had no share in his consideration: James Monkton had determined that his house should be freed from the obnoxious presence of his brother-in-law, and had that end been obtainable only by stepping over the dead body of his wife, it would not have caused him to swerve from his purpose.

He had been opposed and openly rebelled against, and he was set upon having his revenge.

Such were his thoughts as he took his way into the country ; by the time he returned more important matters had driven them from his mind. Dr Monkton never used his own horses at night, and he almost regretted it on this occasion, as he was jolted homewards for about twelve miles in a hack conveyance, and on a cold, dark, November morning.

Though he had plenty to occupy his mind, for the case to which he had been summoned was an intricate one, and he was very desirous to pull the patient through it, because the family doctor had pronounced such to be hopeless. So there he sat, knitting his dark eyebrows and ransacking his clever brain for a new expedient, and hardly noticed that it was six o'clock, and the dawn was breaking, until he paid the fare at his own portals.

Early as it was, however, the attentive Long heard his master's latch-key in the door, and was up at once, eager to ascertain whether he would take a cup of coffee, or wait until he had obtained an hour's rest. But the doctor had already been drenched with hot coffee at the house from which he had come, and declined to take any refreshment except sleep, with which intention he set his foot upon the staircase, closely followed by his attendant.

But as he reached the landing, he started back with an abruptness which nearly sent Long down the stairs again. The lamp which usually burned all night upon the corridor was out, but the gray morning light streaming through the unshuttered window, and the candle carried by the servant, were quite sufficient to reveal the burly carcase of the mastiff, Thug, stretched out upon the fluffy sheepskin mat, passive, though awake.

"Whose work is this ?" said Dr Monkton, turning to the man behind him.

He did not speak loudly, nor (apparently) angrily ; but with a look in his eyes, and an expression about his mouth, which Long had seen before and learned to dread. For his own part, the servant had till then totally forgotten the occurrence of the past night, and although, being a good-natured fellow, he was usually ready to hide the foibles of Robert Brooke as much as possible from his master's notice, he was too much afraid of the consequences on the present occasion not to lay the blame where it was due.

"Whose work is this ?" repeated Dr Monkton ; "by whose order was that dog brought back into the house ?"

"By no one's, sir, that I am aware of," replied Long; "he followed Mr Brooke when he returned home last night, and though John and me tried all we could to persuade him to let us take the animal back to the stables, the young gentleman didn't seem inclined to it, and so the dog stayed here. I did all I could, I assure you, sir," he repeated, observing the ominous look which was creeping over his master's face; "I told Mr Brooke that I knew 'twould be against your wishes, and my mistress, she told him the same, sir; but it was all of no use."

"At what time did this occur?"

"At twelve, sir, or thereabouts."

"And your mistress was up at that hour?"

At this question, poor Long, who fancied he was about to drag Nelly into the scrape as well, stammered more than was needful.

"I don't know as she was rightly 'up,' sir; I didn't see my mistress, but she spoke to Mr Brooke from her dressing-room."

"Go down to the stables, and fetch me a chain and collar."

At this order, portentous from its very brevity, Long disappeared as quickly as he could, and after the necessary delay returned with the articles requested, accompanied by his fellow-labourer, John.

Dr Monkton, instead of being in his room, was still standing on the landing, gazing moodily upon the mastiff, who appeared to return the gaze with interest from his red, sleepless eyes.

"Put it on," he said, referring to the chain and collar, as the men reached his side. Neither of them seemed to relish the command, but the footman, being most accustomed to the dog, was brave enough to attempt its fulfilment. But as he stooped towards the animal's throat, Thug quietly raised his head, and displayed all his fangs, at which John started up rather more quickly than he had knelt down.

"Stand back!" said Long, "and let me try—you don't go the right way about it, John," and taking the collar from the other's hand, he approached the mastiff with a word of encouragement. "Come now, old fellow! there—there—gently—that's right!" but just as he had said "that's right," and laid his hand upon him, Thug gave a growl, which might have warned a braver man to be more prudent, and sent Mr Long against the opposite wall with as much, if not greater agility, than had been previously exhibited by John.

"Why don't you collar the brute?" demanded the doctor, getting impatient at the delay.

"Well, sir, 'tisn't such an easy matter," replied Long, ruefully; "he's been told to lie there, you see, and I expect no one will be able to move him, except 'tis his master or mistress. He's a rare 'un to obey, *I* know! And I shouldn't like to get a bite from him no more than any other would."

"*Bite!*" exclaimed the doctor, contemptuously, "why, he's as gentle as a lamb! However, if you're afraid of that, I'll muzzle him," and walking into his dressing-room, he presently returned with a strap muzzle.

Apparently anxious to show his men what he thought of their pusillanimous fears, Dr Monkton disdained to make use of any coaxing or persuasion towards the mastiff, but silently approaching him with the muzzle in his hand, deliberately knelt down in order to apply it. But Thug was not the inoffensive lamb-like creature he had described him to be. He had not forgotten the thrashing so lately received from the same hand which now attempted to strap together his powerful jaws, and before the doctor had had time to perceive his danger or to regard the warning cry with which the servants saluted him, the dog, half rising from his recumbent position, had seized and bitten him through the fingers, and but for a timely retreat, had next attacked his throat. For even as Long and the footman, alarmed for their master's safety, forcibly dragged him beyond the animal's immediate reach, Thug, with a low, strange sound, which was neither a bark, a growl, nor a moan, darted forwards, and with the evident intention of springing, fixed his glaring, angry eyes upon the doctor's form. But before the men were able to do more than contemplate the threatened horror, the dog had sunk back again upon the sheepskin mat, as though exhausted by the effort he had made.

But neither the suddenness of the animal's attack, the danger, nor the alarm of his companions, had any power to divert Dr Monkton's attention from a resolution instantaneously but irrevocably formed.

He turned away from all the eager inquiries and persuasions of his servants, to issue one command—

"Bring me my gun!"

But even Long's fears for his own safety gave way before the strangeness of such a request.

"Here! sir? what! in the house?" he exclaimed.

"Bring me my gun!" was the only answer he received, given

in a tone of determination which could neither be mistaken nor disobeyed.

Meanwhile Thug's strange low cry, which had not had the power to stir Bertie from his torpid slumbers, had fully roused his poor little mistress.

Nelly had gone to sleep, dreading each moment to hear her husband's step upon the stair; and as is usual in such cases, her rest had been so broken and disturbed that as soon as the dog's howl sounded in her ear, she started up, fully awake, believing he had come. And there she lay, listening to the subdued voices on the landing, wondering whose they were, and what they could portend, and yet not daring at first to do more than listen to them.

Long, keeping a good watch upon the dreaded animal the while, found his way into the dressing-room, and procuring the gun, delivered it into his master's hand. It was always kept loaded—in another moment it was on full cock, and with his finger on the trigger, and a look of malicious pleasure on his face, Dr Monkton cautiously advanced towards the prostrate mastiff.

Poor Thug seemed to know what was in store for him. He made no further effort in his own defence, but merely shut his eyes, and shivered, as the barrel of the gun touched his ear, and the contents were discharged into his brain.

Such a report was sufficient to arouse and alarm every inmate of the house, however soundly they may have been sleeping.

A scream from one side of the corridor, and a shout followed by an oath from the other, announced that the two persons most interested in the mastiff's fate would soon appear to learn it for themselves; but that fact did not seem to affect the perpetrator of the deed further than by apprising him that it would be as well if the two men-servants were first removed from the scene of action.

"Take this down with you," he said carelessly, as he delivered his gun to Long, "and draw the other charge. It has been loaded for such a time that it is quite a chance it did not miss fire;" and then as the men retreated, leaving the dead body of the mastiff upon the landing, and the door of his wife's dressing-room was flung open, he turned quite as coolly to confront the scared face and trembling figure of poor Nelly.

"O James!" she exclaimed, "what has happened? what have you done?" and then her quick eyes roving to where the form of Thug lay outstretched upon the sheepskin mat stained

with his blood, she flew across the corridor, and flung herself down by his side.

"Oh! have you killed my dog? How cruel! how unjust! My poor dog—whom I loved so much, and who never did you any harm. Oh! how could you be so cruel—so very, *very* cruel? Oh! Thug—my poor Thug—how I used to love you!" and in a burst of grief she hid her face on the dead creature's body, and wept passionately.

"Yes, I have killed him, Helena," interposed the cold, modulated tones of her husband's voice, "as I should kill any animal who is turned into a nuisance for my annoyance. But you need not look so indignantly at me about it. If you have any one to thank for this occurrence, it is your brother. He is the murderer of your dog—not myself."

"*I am?*" exclaimed a voice on the other side of them, where Bertie, sobered by his night's rest, appeared, at the door of his own room. "What do you mean by saying so? What have *I* had to do with it?"

"Everything!" returned the doctor; "but your day is over, Robert Brooke. Your follies, as far as they concern our peace, die with your sister's dog."

CHAPTER XLIX.

NELLY AND BERTIE ARE PARTED.

"By what right," exclaimed Bertie, in tones the haughtiness of which, had her attention not been absorbed by grief for her slaughtered favourite, would not have failed to excite the alarm of his sister,—"*by what right,*" he repeated, advancing to the centre of the landing, and confronting his brother-in-law, "do you first destroy property which does not belong to you, and then tax me with being the cause of your violence? I shall be obliged if you will explain yourself."

"I fully intend to do so," replied Dr Monkton, as he slowly and methodically wound a handkerchief about the fingers which bore traces of poor Thug's farewell. "In the first place, the animal was mine to do as I chose with. He belonged to my wife, and our possessions are in common; he proved himself dangerous, and I am perfectly justified in putting him out of the way. In the second, had you left him in the kennel, where I had given orders he should abide, he would probably have been alive at this

moment. By bringing him here, your sister has, as I told her before, only yourself to thank for his death."

"That is a paltry excuse," said Robert Brooke, in return; "the dog was ours, and you knew and acknowledged it."

"Paltry or not, it must stand," replied the doctor, "as I intend to make no other. But it is time that this sort of thing was put a stop to. You have now been a guest in my house for many months, and the long and the short of it is, Robert Brooke, that you have outstayed your welcome. If we are not to quarrel irrevocably, we must part."

At these words Nelly started from her kneeling position and leant against the balustrades, gazing from one man to the other with wide staring eyes.

"A guest?" said Robert Brooke, with heightened colour, and in a tone of interrogation.

"Yes, a guest, most certainly," repeated the doctor, with the utmost nonchalance. "You did not suppose I intended to charge you for your board and lodging, did you? That is not my way of treating the friends who honour me by staying beneath my roof."

"It was not as a *guest* that you spoke of my living with you when we were at Little Bickton," said the other, in a trembling voice.

"Did I not?" was the careless reply. "If so, the reason was, perhaps, because I hoped at that time that your visits here would be so frequent and prolonged, that you would come at last to look upon Hilstone almost in the light of a home. But such an idea, as you must perceive, would be preposterous now. You dislike the place; you refuse to conform to the rules of this establishment, or to recognise the master of it in myself; added to which, your habits are such as to render you quite unfit to be the associate of your sister. There are several other reasons, unnecessary for me to particularise, which render it desirable that your visit to us should, at all events, for the present, be—what shall I call it?" he continued, smiling,—“I can hardly say—curtailed, considering the time it has already lasted;—well, terminated then, or let us say, postponed until a more favourable opportunity. You have your own money, you know; a sufficiency for your maintenance has been settled on you; therefore you can have no excuse to make, or, as far as I can see, complaint."

"I have no wish or intention of making either," replied Robert Brooke, who had nevertheless turned very pale at the prospect of parting with his sister; "but if I leave your house, I leave it for

ever. Do you imagine I would stay to be a pensioner on your bounty ; or to run the risk of being again insulted as you have insulted me this morning ? No ! you may force me to go, if you choose, but you will never see me again if you do."

"Bertie ! Bertie ! for Heaven's sake think what you are saying," cried Nelly, as she darted across the landing, and seized her brother's hand. He turned, and with quivering lips and a face which was ashen-gray regarded her fondly.

"I know what I am saying, Nell, well enough ; and I have one regret in saying it—yourself !"

"In that respect you must, of course, act as you see fit," replied Dr Monkton. "It makes no alteration in what I said to you, or think concerning you. You appear to me to have made a slight mistake respecting the intentions I entertained on your behalf previous to my marriage, but if so, it is rectified now, and not likely to occur again."

"A slight mistake !" shouted Robert Brooke, without heeding the warning pressure of his sister's hand. "You know, Monkton, that it was not a mistake. You know that before my sister consented to marry you, you not only told her that your house should be my home, but held out hopes of my restoration to health which you have not even attempted to fulfil. Nell thought, I know she did—as I was fool enough to think too—that you were almost as interested in myself as she is, and that her marriage was to secure me every comfort for life ; else, why is she here, poor child ?—why is she here ?"

"You are not paying a high compliment to my powers of pleasing," remarked Dr Monkton in reply. "I trust that Helena had other inducements to become my wife beside the very futile hope of seeing a miracle performed in your behalf. If I slightly flattered her desires with respect to yourself at that period, it was only what any other man in the same situation would have done ; and you, at any rate, might have been considered sober enough to calculate the chances of your cure. But you have been blinded by selfishness to everything but what should further your own good."

"How can you stand there and disclaim your own words ? Did you not propose trying all kinds of devices for the strengthening of my spine ? Chemical baths, and galvanism, and shampooing, and mechanical supports ? Where are all the fine remedies which were to afford me relief ? Which of them has been tried ? which even procured ? No ! you cannot deny that you lured us

here under false pretences ; and that you have not fulfilled one of the promises you made ! ”

Dr Monkton smiled at the infuriated youth with contemptuous pity.

“ I believe I have heard you use exactly the same expression, Robert, with regard to your cousin Nigel Brooke. He lured your sister to the Chase, did he not, under false pretences ? and offered you his assistance, doubtless, with a similar design. All the world is against you, except yourself. That fact is evident.”

“ Do you wish to madden me ? ” exclaimed Bertie, as he shook off Nelly’s clinging grasp and advanced to his brother-in-law ; “ your pretence with respect to your feeling for Nigel Brooke is another of the vile deceptions for which, were I not cursed with this impotency, I would strike you to the ground.”

“ Softly, softly ! ” sarcastically urged Dr Monkton, holding up a hand as though to defend himself, “ you frighten me, Robert, with your threats. But whilst we are on the subject of deception, I have a word to say to yourself. I think we may cry quits there. What about the deception that, had it lain with yourself, would have been practised upon me with regard to my wife ? ”

At this question, Nelly (who, though too terrified to interfere, was watching the progress of the quarrel in the most agonising suspense) saw the same strange gray shade steal over her brother’s face which had so much startled her once before, when her husband made a similar accusation against him at the luncheon-table.

“ Deception ! ” he stammered, but with the desperation of one who feels that the betrayal of an important secret is close at hand, “ what deception ? ”

“ You know as well as I do,” replied Dr Monkton, sternly, “ but since you force an explanation from me, be it so. That by which you would have concealed from me the truth concerning your parentage, and led me to believe that I was about to take a wife of honourable birth.”

“ And can you prove otherwise,” said Robert Brooke, with a final endeavour at concealment.

“ Of course I can. Your guardian, being a gentleman, revealed every particular to me, as you, had you been a man, might have guessed he would do.”

“ And pray, what had he to reveal ? ” persevered his opponent, although the question was but a gasping whisper.

“ That you are—bastards ! ”

"*Coward!*" exclaimed Robert Brooke, as he staggered back against the opposite wall.

"Bertie! Bertie! it is not true," screamed Nelly, as she again flew to her brother's side; "say it is not true. Tell him it is a lie, it is a mistake. Mr Ray must have been mistaken; we were poor, darling, and uneducated, and very humble in our way of living, but we are not that—oh! say we are not that!" and she sunk down sobbing, with her arms clasped about his knees.

Old Aggie, who was the only one of the servants who had dared to appear upon the scene (although the others had taken care to station themselves within a convenient distance for hearing) now came forward and tried to disengage Nelly from her brother, for the latter, leaning back against the door-post, seemed almost as if he were about to faint.

"Come, Miss Nelly; come, my darling," said the old nurse, coaxingly. "Let Master Robert bide a bit, for all this will be too much for him. Don't you take on so, dearie, for let people say what they will, your own lives have been honourable, and no one can't deny it."

"No, no! nurse," exclaimed the girl, resisting all Aggie's efforts to raise her; "let me alone, don't touch me, until Bertie has given me an answer. Brother, darling! my own brother! tell me, for God's sake, that it isn't true! that we are not what—what *he*—called us; and I will go away at once, and try to be contented."

"I *can't*, Nelly," said Bertie, panting with excitement. "I *can't*, darling, or I would, but it is true—true as *he* is false! I have kept it from you, dear—I thought it best—but I have had my reward in hearing you first learn it from *his* lips. We are all that he has said—nameless, forsaken, and obscure, and I wish to God I had been content that we should remain so."

"But we are still the same," cried Nelly, rising to her feet and folding her brother in her arms; "we are still own brother and sister, Bertie—no shame can unmake us that. Let us go away together, darling; let us go where no one will care to throw our misfortune in our face; or where, happy in each other's love, we can afford to laugh at them, even though they should. We want no grand houses nor fine clothes, nor carriages, to make us happy, Bertie—we only want each other; and what should separate us, born in the same hour and to the same heritage of shame! Come, darling, let us go; in a few days, or weeks, or months, we shall have forgotten all this misery, and you shall never want whilst I can

work for you." And in the energy of her devoted love, Nelly was really urging her brother towards the head of the staircase, as though they could leave the house then and there, and never re-enter it. But she was soon recalled to a sense of her position.

"Pardon me, Helena," said the calm voice of her husband, "but you seem to have forgotten that you are no longer a free agent. That your brother, after his violent language and expressed determination, quits our roof, is unavoidable; but I must beg you to remember that you are my wife, and that your place is *here*, where your duty lies, and your implicit obedience is due."

At this reminder, Nelly's arms relaxed their grasp of her brother, and she sank down wearily by his side.

"Oh, let me go!" she said, looking up at her husband with a white, worn face, "let me go with him, James; I shall die if you keep me here. We are both the same, you know; if he is a disgrace to you, so am I; let me go away with him, and we will never trouble you by word or look again."

"Go away with him!" replied James Monkton, angrily, "what folly are you talking? *How* could you go away with him, even if I wished it, without creating a scandal which should raise the town? Your brother leaving us, after so long a visit, is only natural, and easily accounted for; but do you imagine that I intend our private affairs to become the comment of Hilstone? You are a perfect child, Helena. Get up from that absurd position; and if you cannot better control your feelings and your words, go into your bedroom until you are more calm. You will let every servant in the house know the reason of our disagreement. It is most unreasonable of you, most ill-judged."

She rose as passively as she had sunk down, and stood by the side of her brother, trembling.

"Poor child," said Bertie, as he touched her cold lips with his own. "I have sold you for very little indeed. I made a bad bargain of you, Nell; and if you ever forgive me, it is more than I shall do myself."

"Mr Brooke," interposed Dr Monkton, "if you intend to stand there much longer, insulting me by your reminiscences and your regrets, you will reduce me to the unpleasant necessity of sending for a fly to remove yourself and your possessions from my house. The matter is settled, that we part, and the sooner it takes place the better."

"I am entirely of your opinion," returned the other. "Aggie, pack up my things, and tell one of the servants to fetch a cab."

The "things," consisting only of his clothes, did not take long to pack, and by the time he had exchanged his dressing-gown for his ordinary attire, they were strapped down and ready for travelling. Meanwhile Dr Monkton had retired to his own room, and Nelly, passive from sheer despair, sat beside old Aggie, with folded hands, gazing dreamily at each article as she placed it in the portmanteau; but when the arrangements were complete, and the rattling wheels of a hack conveyance had stopped before the door, and Bertie, tearless, and as despairing as herself, came towards her with the intention of saying farewell, all Nelly's passiveness passed away, and she gave a shriek which resounded throughout the house, and brought Dr Monkton from his dressing-room again, upon the landing.

"Good-bye!" she screamed. "Oh, no, Bertie! not good-bye! I can't say it! I couldn't say it! I should die! Let me go with you, brother! Let me go with him, James! Don't keep me here to die all by myself. O Bertie! O my darling! kill me before you go away and leave me all alone."

She clung to him, she grasped him with a force and energy which rendered it difficult even for Dr Monkton to disengage her, and utterly impossible for Bertie to free himself.

"It *must* be, Nelly; there is no hope, no chance of an alternative. Be brave, darling, be good; think how often you have been so before for my sake, and try it once again, if you don't wish this parting to prove my death. It is like death already. It is worse than death."

And then, as he tore himself from her, and gained the head of the staircase, he turned and said—

"Nelly, for the first time I seem to see all your unselfishness and your love. This is my own fault—I might have prevented it had I chosen; but what has your life been but one long thought of me? God bless you for it!"

But she could not let him go. She shook off her husband's hold, as though she had equalled him in strength, and flew after her brother.

"Bertie; only one word! I *am* good you see, I *am* brave! I will not distress you more than I can help; but where are you going, darling? where am I to find you when I come?"

The possibility of not following him was incredible to her.

"I can't say, Nelly, but I think to London. Anyway, you shall hear of course you shall hear from me every day and every hour. I shall have no pleasure except in writing to you."

"But Aggie must go with you," she replied. "Oh, where is Aggie? she must make herself ready at once;" and flying after the old woman, who had retreated weeping to her room, Nelly came upon her with the startling announcement—

"Nurse, what are you about? Bertie is going directly, and of course you must go with him. How could he get on without either of us?"

"Lor'! my deary," exclaimed old Aggie, terribly fluttered by the sudden command, "however can I get ready to go along of Master Robert now? I haven't a rag put up, Miss Nelly, and ever so many trifles owing in the town. 'Tis morally impossible, my dear, as I can accompany your brother to-day; to-morrow or next day I could follow him, perhaps, if yourself and the doctor see fit, but to go along of him now"——

"It must be *now*, Aggie! you must go with him directly," replied her mistress, decidedly, "or I will never speak or look at you again. Oh!" altering her tone to one of supplication, "think what I am suffering, and put on your things at once. On my knees, dear old nurse, I beg and pray of you to do as I ask. Never mind your boxes or your bills, they shall be sent after you, and paid; I will see to all that; only get ready, that Bertie may not go alone."

And then, as the poor old woman, scarcely knowing, between her love for Nelly and her grief at the turn things had taken, what she was about, began to array herself in her bonnet and shawl, the girl drew a purse from her bosom and thrust it into her hand.

"See here, Aggie! I snatched this from my dressing-table as I passed. I don't know how much there is in it, but it is all mine: keep it, and use it for Bertie and yourself, and in the pocket," she added, blushing, "there is a card which Cousin Nigel gave me, with his address in town. If Bertie should go to London, nurse, promise me that you will find out Mr Brooke, and let him know that he is there, and that I am miserable: that is all."

She seized the old woman's withered face between her hands, and kissed it affectionately.

"God bless you, dear old nurse! Take care of him, be gentle with him, love him for my sake: you are all the hope I have in parting with him."

Then she returned to the landing, and spoke almost as rapidly to Bertie.

"She is coming, dearest, she will not be a minute. Say you will wait for her, or you will break my heart."

"Well! I will wait a minute," he replied, "but it must not be more, for each extra minute in this house is an hour of my life;" and then perceiving a furtive smile upon the face of his brother-in-law, Robert Brooke turned to him and said—

"Ay, you may laugh, Monkton, but that does not alter either the truth or the meaning of my words. You have insulted me to-day as you would never have dared to do had I been able to resent it like another man. You think, I daresay, with the body of that poor mastiff lying dead at your feet, and the carriage waiting at the door to convey me from this house, that you have gained the victory, and as far as I am concerned, perhaps you have; but there is a God in heaven, Monkton, and as you treat that girl, whom you bought with promises which you have never fulfilled, so will I pray that He may remember you. You have acted the part of a coward towards me this day, but beware how you act in the same manner towards my sister, for she has an Advocate and Protector of whom I am not worthy to boast."

"All very fine talking," sneered Dr Monkton, who had nevertheless considerably changed countenance at this address, "but I think we have had almost enough of it for once, Mr Brooke, and I am afraid you will find that it will not advance your own interests, for with my consent your sister holds no further communication with you from to-day."

At the announcement of this fresh trouble, Nelly, who had been leaning over the balustrades, eagerly drinking in the last sounds of her brother's voice, and gazing at his retreating figure with sad, wild eyes, turned and stared into her husband's face as if she were bewildered.

"It is true, Helena!" he said, in answer to her imploring gaze, "if your own feelings do not prompt you to abstain from associating with one who has so grossly insulted myself, I shall be compelled to adopt means by which you will be effectually prevented doing so."

Then, as Bertie, without further remonstrance, descended the remainder of the flight of stairs, and she heard the vehicle which was conveying Aggie and himself to the station, drive rapidly away, Nelly fell down, like a stone, where her husband's cruel words had smitten her, across the lifeless body of her favourite Thug.

CHAPTER L.

THE PROPHECIES OF MRS PROWSE ARE NOT VERIFIED.

LOVE that is reared upon no better foundation than passion can never last. It is like making a bonfire of paper or shavings, without more solid fuel, which, however much they may crackle and splutter on being lighted, will eventually die out, and leave nothing but blackness behind. And how can it be otherwise whilst we are creatures of change? A few days or weeks, at the most a few months, are sufficient to render us familiar with each line in a picture, each word in a poem, each note in a melody, and then, however they enchanted us at first, we tire of them, regard them no more than if we had never seen or heard them, and begin to look around us for something new; and were it possible to treat the man or woman of whom we have become weary like a painting or a book, to let them hang on our walls without further notice, or lie, covered with dust, upon our bookshelves, whilst we run about in search of novelties, marriage for the sake of a pleasing face or an engaging manner might not be attended with the heavy risk which it is now.

But we know that it is otherwise. We know that when we have become so accustomed to the perfect features, or the graceful figure, that they attract us no more than the homeliest would do; if there is no fresh ever-varying mind, welling over with new thoughts, new ideas, new feelings, to engage our attention and fall back upon, we get as sick of the enforced companionship as if we were compelled to read the same vapid composition over and over again, from beginning to end.

Dr Monkton need not have proved this to be the case with his wife had he so chosen.

With all her ignorance and simplicity, Nelly had a fund of original matter on which he might have drawn, and found his trouble well repaid him. She had plenty of common sense and a hardy vigorous mind, which would have delighted in being taught, and thought no trouble too great which should advance that end. And she possessed what was still better, a quick comprehension to fasten eagerly on any subject to which his superior intellect had guided it, combined with a humble opinion of herself, and an earnest desire to learn. But of what value or interest were these mental qualities to James Monkton? He

had married the girl for her pretty face and naïve manner, and he had not even stopped to inquire if she possessed any other qualifications for becoming his life-companion.

Since their marriage he had seen her at breakfast and luncheon and dinner, and now and then he had spent an evening in her company. If Nelly were becomingly dressed on those occasions, appeared cheerful and good-tempered, and not averse to receiving his caresses, her husband was perfectly satisfied, for his life was lived apart from hers or any woman's.

He was absorbed in his professional pursuits, and had his wife gone on smiling and contented, and otherwise conducting herself unobnoxiously, he would probably have remained as satisfied with her until the end.

But as soon as any occasion for annoyance arose between them ; as soon as the poor girl either directly or indirectly became a cause of offence to him, the worth of his professed attachment became apparent.

As he raised her senseless body from the spot where it had fallen, and thought that this separation from her brother might prove but the commencement of a train of evils with herself, Dr Monkton was almost sorry he had married her. The long dark lashes which lay upon her cheeks had no attractions for him at that moment. The white teeth gleaming through her parted lips, the curved mouth, the broad fair forehead,—what were they to him then ? Only part and parcel of a woman who had not sufficient strength of mind to control her feelings, and evidently intended to make a nuisance of herself. As he carried her across the landing to her own room, he did not notice one of the beauties over which a few months before he had fallen into raptures. As he laid her on her bed and stood by until she had regained her consciousness, he did not even kiss the face which he had considered, so short a time ago, to be the most engaging in the world. Yet Dr Monkton's feelings were not singular. In this respect he was like most of his fellow-creatures to whom possession means satiety. But had he loved Nelly as he should have loved his wife ; had her physical attractions been a secondary consideration to him, compared to her heart and soul, he would have felt her to be dearer in an hour of such helplessness than she had ever appeared in the flush and pride of beauty. As it was, however, as soon as he perceived that she had recovered from her swoon, he rang the bell for the housemaid, and delivering her mistress to her charge, retired to his own room.

When he emerged thence, an hour afterwards, the house seemed quite changed. It really looked cheerful again. The morning sun, bright for the time of year, was streaming over the corridor from which the dead body of the mastiff, together with the mat he died on, had been carefully removed ; and in the rooms which had been occupied by Robert Brooke, women were laughing and chatting with each other as they shook up the bolsters and mattresses, and piled all the furniture together, preparatory to a thorough clearing. The doctor, attired with his usual care, his glossy hair and whiskers scrupulously attended to, and holding a scented cambric handkerchief in his hand, stepped lightly across the landing to the apartment of his wife.

"I am going down to breakfast, Helena !" he said, with affected animation. "Shall I send yours up here ?"

She was lying just as he had left her, passively stretched upon the bed, with her languid eyes fixed upon the patch of sky which she could distinguish through the window-pane.

"You will take something to eat, will you not ?" he repeated, thinking she had not heard his words.

But she never answered him, and only shuddered when he laid his hand upon her shoulder. So he turned away, resolving in his mind that she was sulky, and bid the woman in attendance follow him, to carry up the breakfast-tray.

He did not suffer the incidents of the morning to destroy his own appetite, however ; on the contrary, it was, if anything, better than usual. The house was clear of two of its greatest nuisances : Robert Brooke was gone, and the mastiff was dead ; even the atmosphere seemed brighter and lighter in consequence ; and Dr Monkton felt as though he were going to begin life anew. So he attacked the various dishes before him with considerable relish, and was detected humming to himself as he entered his consulting-room ; an occurrence so unprecedented, that Long remarked in confidence to John, that he shouldn't wonder now if he heard that the world itself was coming to an end. But though Dr Monkton was so light-hearted and content, he did not feel easy when, two hours afterwards, Elizabeth the housemaid asked to see him before he left home, to communicate the fact that her mistress had neither moved nor spoke since he had seen her last. He was not sure what termination this unusual calmness might not have, and did not like to leave Nelly alone with the servants. So he despatched a message to request the presence of his sister, and in a few minutes more, Mrs Prowse bustled into his apartments.

"My dear James!" she commenced, "is not this news too good to be true? Are they really both of them gone—that most unpleasant young man, and that odious dog? I could scarcely believe my ears when Long told me of it! What a deliverance! I declare the place looks quite different without them already. But how did it all come about? I am dying to hear."

"Very naturally," replied her brother. "The mastiff showed himself to be dangerously inclined, and so I shot him, as I should have done either of my own animals under the same circumstances; however, Brooke chose to resent the act as a butchery, and we came to words about it, which ended in his leaving for London; which, after all, you know, is not to be wondered at, for his visit here has extended over four months already, and I rather think he wanted an excuse for a change himself. Hilstone is not a lively place for a young man."

Dr Monkton mentioned the occurrence in this offhand manner, because his sister was a great gossip, and he had no desire for his family quarrels to become patent to the town; but even whilst he spoke he felt she was aware that his words were not the expression of his real feelings.

"Well, perhaps not," returned Mrs Prowse, willing to humour him, although she knew that this event was what he had been trying to bring about for weeks past, "but it is just as well it has happened so. Guests should not outstay their welcome, and this is not the best time of the year in which to visit Hilstone. But what have you done to your hand?"

"Oh! that was a last piece of attention on Thug's part," replied the doctor, smiling, as he regarded the long white fingers which he had daintily patched with court-plaster; "he seized and bit me here as I was about to muzzle him."

"The nasty dangerous brute!" exclaimed his sister; "how thankful I am that you destroyed him. But I hope the wounds won't be troublesome—are they deep?"

"Oh dear, no!" replied the doctor, indifferently; "they are nothing—mere scratches—only they look unsightly. But why I sent for you, Matilda, was to ask if you would be troubled to sit by Helena during my absence. I shall not be gone long."

"To be sure, if you wish it, James; though I can't say that she usually appears to desire my company. But what's the matter with her—is she ill?"

"Not ill, perhaps—but considerably upset by all this annoyance. She is on her bed at present, but I think it would be a

kindness if you could persuade her to dress and come downstairs. She evidently feels the separation from her brother !”

“*Feels* it, my dear James ! Of course she *feels* it ; but that is not the slightest excuse for neglecting her household duties. I should like to know when you have known *me* to lie in bed on account of my feelings, or any such rubbish.”

“There is no doubt that they are attached to one another !” remarked Dr Monkton, as he put his papers together, preparatory for a start.

“And so are we, I trust ; and so are most brothers and sisters : but that is no reason that they should never be separated. And how your wife could ever have expected anything else is my wonder. There are few people who would have kept that young man here as long as you have, with his nasty dissipated habits and his impertinent manner. I am sure, if she thinks rightly, she should consider it quite a blessing that he has left the house. I should if he in any way belonged to me.”

“Well, don’t say anything to Helena about his not coming back again,—at all events, to-day ; because I fancy it is that idea which is worrying her most. And of course he *will* come back, sooner or later—there is little doubt about that !”

This speech of the doctor’s, again intended to mislead his sister, did its work as effectually as its predecessor.

“To be sure not !” she replied, “only I *do* hope that you will not be so foolish as to give him up the guest-chamber again. It has gone to my heart to see how all that beautiful furniture has been tossed and tumbled about for his convenience ; and I am sure it will take months to sweeten those rooms sufficiently for the use of any decent person. Bachelors have always been put upon the upper story before, and I can’t see why Mr Brooke is to be treated differently to everybody else.”

“Well, well,” interrupted the doctor, who considered the discussion a sad waste of time, “it will be soon enough to talk about that when Robert Brooke returns to Hilstone. Meanwhile my patients are waiting for me, and I want you to go and look after my wife.”

“Oh ! of course, my dear James, I will run up at once, and you will see Helena at the luncheon-table—you may depend upon that ! Indeed, I shall *insist* upon her rising ; and if I find she is at all low, I will take her round to the deanery with me to-night. Mrs Filmer begged me to step in after dinner ; and, in fact, James,” lowering her voice, “I prophesy that you will find

Helena altogether a different creature now her brother is gone. His influence was the very worst to which she could be subjected, and now that it is removed, if you will leave her to dear Mrs Filmer and myself for a few weeks, we shall show you quite another young lady at the close of them."

This notion, which coincided with his own ideas of the change which separation from her brother might effect in Nelly, pleased Dr Monkton, and he left Mrs Prowse to pursue her system of education as cheerfully as though no blight had fallen on the life of his young wife.

The first thing which his sister did upon his departure was to whisk up-stairs, and knock sharply at the door of Nelly's room, which, after a short delay, was opened by Elizabeth.

"Dear me! Elizabeth!" exclaimed the canon's wife, "why didn't you open the door before? What are you all about up here? Why, Mrs James!" going up to the silent figure on the bed, "you don't mean to tell me you have not yet risen—do you know what time it is?—past twelve o'clock, and such a genial morning. I've been all round the town before this, about some commissions, for dear Mrs Filmer. Why, what's the matter with you—are you ill—are you in pain—or are you only lazy?"

At this tirade, which was jerked out in Mrs Prowse's shrillest voice and quickest manner, Nelly just raised her languid eyes for a moment, and then the heavy lids drooped again, and she turned away from the speaker.

"If you please, ma'am, I don't think my mistress is well," interposed the housemaid; "for I can't get her to drink her tea, nor eat any breakfast; and she's been lying just that way, without stirring or speaking, ever since I was called to her by the doctor."

"But surely she can speak to *me*, if she can do nothing else. So, I hear your brother's gone to London, Mrs James—he has a nice day for travelling, has he not?—and he'll find town much gayer than Hilstone. I'm afraid our style of life was rather too quiet to suit his tastes. Eh, Mrs James?"

At this allusion to Bertie, Nelly gave a deep sigh, and half raising her head from her pillow, stared about her as though just aroused from sleep.

"And the dog, too!" continued Mrs Prowse, following up her advantage, "so he's gone into the bargain. Quite a clearance, isn't it? Well, I never was partial to the animal, as you know, and always considered him most unfit for a lady's pet; but still I am sorry it was necessary to destroy the poor creature, because he would have made a fine watch-dog, which was his proper

vocation ; and yet, after all, perhaps it is as well, for of course my brother is the best judge of what was necessary to be done ! ”

“ Oh ! it was *not* necessary—it was not at *all* necessary,” cried Nelly, in a voice of pain, as the rattling talk of her sister-in-law recalled her trouble to her mind : “ my poor dog ! my dear old dog ! pray don’t speak of it—don’t mention it again—I cannot bear it ! ” and she turned her face upon her pillow, and began to weep.

“ Oh, well ! ” exclaimed Mrs Prowse, testily, “ if the mere mention of the animal is to give offence, of course we had better avoid it. But surely the death of a dog, Mrs James—of a dangerous, vicious dog, which was ready to attack everybody who approached him—is not to be permitted to keep you in this state of inaction, whilst your duties as the mistress of my brother’s establishment are being neglected. It would be far more becoming, I think, considering what is required, were you to rise and look after your household matters instead of lying here, crying for what cannot be helped. One would think, to see you, that it was a Christian you were lamenting, instead of a brute.”

Nelly rose from her position at once ; it was better to constrain herself to action than to stop quietly there, whilst she was being “ talked at ” by Mrs Prowse ; and her sister-in-law seeing the good effect already produced by her words, began to credit herself with more discernment than she had dared to hope that she possessed.

“ Come, that’s right, Mrs James ! ” she said, with an air of patronage, “ you must dress and come down-stairs, and make a good luncheon, and then you will feel yourself again. Your brother’s gone to have *his* holiday, you know, and so you must make the best use of yours, and enjoy yourself during his absence. Every one has to part with their friends at times, and of course they feel the change at first ; but no woman of good sense would permit her feelings to interfere with the routine of her husband’s establishment.”

To this speech, as before, Nelly made no reply, but slowly going through the business of her toilet, permitted the housemaid to robe her first in one garment and then another, whilst she sat like a statue to be dressed. When the business was concluded, Mrs Prowse would have tucked the girl’s arm under her own, in a jaunty and affable manner, as if she had determined on the thing and accomplished it, but Nelly drew back from the proffered assistance, and walked by herself slowly but steadily. When she came out upon the landing, and her eye fell on the open door of what had been Bertie’s room, and the spot where she had last seen the wretched carcase of Thug, she shuddered, but no more, and proceeded down the stairs without glancing at them again. But

once in the dining-room, Mrs Prowse found that her power over her sister-in-law had departed. Nelly seated herself in an arm-chair, and with her clasped hands upon her lap, gazed idly out of the window or on the ground. Not all the efforts of the canon's wife could induce her to talk nor to smile, and when Dr Monkton joined them at the luncheon-table he found it as impossible to persuade her to eat,—indeed more so, for she visibly shrunk from him whenever he addressed or approached her. At dinner it was just the same. Nelly was dressed as carefully as usual, and was as punctual in her attendance at the table ; but though she took the different eatables upon her plate, she sent them away untasted ; and her answers, if any, were given in monosyllables. So her husband lost his temper in consequence, and relinquished even the attempt to rouse her, and as the only thing she had done with energy since the morning was to refuse to be taken to the deanery, she was left in peace by both brother and sister, and permitted to go early to her bed. But the next day it was the same, and the day after that, and for many days in succession. There was no visible alteration in Nelly's manner. She dressed and came down-stairs, and presided at meals ; gave her orders, and spoke when she was spoken to, but nothing more. Not a smile, not a voluntary communication passed her lips ; but she spent all her leisure time with her folded hands before her, gazing out upon the wintry sky, or on the ground, as if she were striving to solve some mystery beyond her comprehension. She did not weep, or if so, no one saw her tears, but every now and then a sigh which seemed to come from the deepest recesses of her heart would issue from her lips, and be scarcely lost upon the air before it was followed by another.

And neither did she rest by night, for whenever her husband had the opportunity for observation, he invariably found her lying on her pillows with wide-open sleepless eyes, which only closed with involuntary shrinking as she noticed his approach.

This sort of conduct nettled Dr Monkton ; he would not believe but that it was assumed for his annoyance, and he began to feel as revengeful towards Nelly as he had done towards her brother. He had not forgotten, nor permitted to pass unobserved, the allusion which Robert Brooke had made to his sister's object in accepting his proposals ; and it was brought back vividly to his recollection by her present behaviour. But he resolved that it should not continue. Over the boy he had possessed no control except by banishing him from his presence, but his wife was his own to do as he chose with, and his firm determination was to break the obstinacy of her spirit by preventing her having any

communication with her absent brother until she displayed more cordial feelings towards himself.

Still Mrs Prowse was more hopeful than was to be expected of her, and continued to affirm that if Nelly were only given over to the tender mercies of Mrs Filmer and herself, a few weeks' discipline would make a different creature of her.

But after some five or six days of almost lifeless languor, the poor girl seemed suddenly to undergo a change. From being passive she became restless and excited. She began to watch for the arrival of the daily post, the hours for which might almost have been traced by the feverish flush which gathered on her cheek, as they approached; and the livid pallor which they left as they departed without bringing her a letter from her brother. At this juncture she abandoned that inert position of despair, and took to wandering about the house in an aimless, unsatisfied manner instead, roaming from room to room as though in quest of something which she never found.

And once at night, as Dr Monkton was returning from his business, he was struck by seeing the door of the empty guest-chamber left wide open, and entering to ascertain the cause, was startled to see an apparition clothed in white, with flowing hair, who, swaying to and fro over the forsaken bed, and moaning to herself in sleep, kept praying Bertie to come back again, or she should die. And at that time, too, he heard her couple another name with that of Bertie, and call loudly upon Nigel Brooke to fulfil his oft-repeated promise, and to save her brother.

Yet Nelly never spoke to her husband on the subject. She never mentioned Robert's name, nor communicated her anxiety at receiving no letter from him, either to the doctor or his sister. She mourned in secret, and suffered by herself, until a whole fortnight had gone by since the morning that poor Thug met his death, and yet no news of the traveller had arrived; and no change for the better appeared in Nelly's conduct. Mrs Prowse's prophecies as to the benefit which must accrue from a separation between the twins did not seem in a fair way of being realised.

When, one day, all the girl's apathetic patience at once deserted her. A light seemed suddenly to break upon her mind, and suggesting what so strange a silence might portend, overcame her invincible repugnance to entering upon the subject with her husband. It was as though nature had succumbed, and could bear the strain laid upon it no longer, for with a rapidly-formed resolution she burst one morning into the doctor's own room, and addressed him vehemently in these words—

"James! where is Bertie?—where is my brother?—why is it that I have never heard from him?"

CHAPTER LI.

THE BROTHER AND SISTER MEET AGAIN.

THE "gratis" patients had dispersed, and the doctor happened to be alone, jotting down his day's work in his memorandum-book. At the excited questions which burst from his wife, he merely looked up from his occupation and answered, coolly—

"How should I know? Am I your brother's keeper?"

He could have satisfied her at that very moment. He could have told her where Bertie was, and what he was about; but had he done so, he would have been robbed of his revenge. Even whilst he marked her dilated eye, round which anxiety and sleeplessness had set dark rings, and watched the heaving of her breast, he smiled to think that silence and neglect had already driven her so far to his feet.

"But where can he be, what can he be doing?" she continued, wildly. "It is now two whole weeks since he went from here, and I have not had a line to tell me where he may be found. Oh, James! I have been patient, I have been submissive; have I not? If you know where Bertie is, pray tell me; don't keep me longer in suspense!"

But it was Dr Monkton's turn to triumph now, and he was not slow to avail himself of the opportunity.

"So you have at last thought fit to consult me on the subject," he quietly observed, as he continued pencilling down the various engagements he had made. "Perhaps it would have been better had you decided on doing so before. However, I really don't see of what assistance I can be to you in the matter. Your brother can write, I believe. If he had wished to communicate with you, I suppose he would have done so."

"Oh, no! that cannot be the reason," she replied, forgetting in her anxiety to resent the coldness of his demeanour. "I am sure he would have written if he could: his last promise to me was to do so. But cannot I find out—is there no means by which I can ascertain where he is living at this moment?"

"What, in London?" returned her husband, laughing at the idea which so distressed her, "oh, easily I should imagine. You would only have to walk about the streets, asking every one you met if they had seen an old woman and a cripple going about

together, and could direct you to their abode. You would be sure to find them; old women and cripples are such very unusual sights in the metropolis."

She covered her face with her hands; she could not bear that he should witness the agony he jeered at.

Then she asked outright, as if in desperation—

"James, have *you* had any news of Bertie since he went—has any letter come for me from him? If so, in God's name, I entreat of you to give it me!"

She evidently could not part with the preconceived notion that her husband knew more of the matter than she did. But he also had formed his ideas upon the subject, and was as loath to relinquish them as she was. Yet, how could he have resisted that voice of passionate entreaty, those mournful pleading eyes?

"I believe you have asked me that question once before," he said, "or something very similar to it. If you think I have your brother anywhere concealed about my person, Helena, you had better come and search me, but I am afraid you will find it lost trouble. The fact is, you have had too much faith in a promise made on the spur of the moment. He said he would write to you; probably after a time he may do so; but considering his habits are not of the most quiet and respectable order, it would be strange if a first introduction to the dissipations of London left him much leisure for writing, even supposing he has been sober enough since his departure to enable him to hold a pen."

Nelly only waited to hear the sarcasm conveyed in his last words before she left the room. She felt that it was useless to appeal further to the feelings of a man who had none. She had arrived at last at the true knowledge of her husband's character. His malice and resentment once thoroughly roused, the sight of misery made as much impression on him as water does upon a stone. But, from that day, her strength rapidly declined. She swallowed the medicine which Dr Monkton thought fit to prescribe for her, but it made no alteration in her health; her appetite and spirits became capricious, and she would as often eat voraciously as she would go fasting, or laugh with excitement, as she would sit passive in despair.

But whether one mood was upon her or the other, Nelly was in a constant state of fever.

Her hands and face were always burning, and the plumpness of her cheeks fell in and left her large, blue eyes, surrounded by broad circles of dark violet colour, standing prominently forward and glowing like a fire without flame.

Of course, so evident an alteration could not take place in the doctor's young wife without exciting the comments of all Hilstone ; indeed, the town would not have considered it was doing its duty, and certainly would not have been acting up to its character, if it had left so strictly private and personal a matter alone.

It talked incessantly—its aristocracy and its mobocracy talked ; and its hedges and ditches, and bricks and mortar, would all have talked likewise, had they but possessed the gift of language.

The particulars of the "extraordinary change," the why and the wherefore of the "extraordinary change," and the probable duration of the "extraordinary change," in Mrs Monkton, were fully discussed, not only by Nelly's equals, but by her inferiors.

Mrs Filmer would loudly call out to Mrs Prowse across a drawing-room full of company, to inquire whether her poor sister-in-law appeared in any better spirits than she had done the day before, or whether any news had been heard of that unprincipled young man, her brother ; and Mrs Pridding, the confectioner's wife, would wag her sage head across the counter at Mrs Biffins, the grocer's mother, whilst she communicated the news that there was no improvement in the state of the doctor's wife, and her own opinion was, that "the poor young creature was took for death."

Hilstone did more than talk, it called to inquire. Day after day shoals of visitors looked in to see how "dear Mrs Monkton" was, and to ask if she had received news of Mr Brooke.

And sometimes Nelly would see her tormentors, and laugh as she parried their curiosity concerning Bertie's silence and her own failing health ; and at others, she would shut herself up in her room, and refuse admittance even to the august Mrs Filmer or the pertinacious Mrs Prowse. The latter lady had given her up long ago, and informed her brother of the fact, adding, that what she had mistaken for submission in Helena, had proved to be only obstinacy ; and that now she came to look more closely into her character, she was of opinion that the young man's disposition was the best of the two, "which isn't saying much for your wife," she would spitefully remark in conclusion.

There was only one person in all Hilstone who was any comfort to the unhappy girl at this time, and that was poor, meek, inoffensive Canon Prowse, who (after having listened patiently, perhaps, to a lengthy stricture from his wife, upon the catalogue of Nelly's sins) would steal away from the shrill sound of her vixenish voice, and (first well assured that he was not watched) quietly enter the portals of No. 15.

There he would probably find the subject of the late discussion

sitting all alone in the dusk, with dry eyes and burning hands and a countenance so woe-begone that it touched his very heart, and taking a seat beside her, the good man would spend an hour in quiet talk, which, though chiefly maintained by himself, was often remembered by his listener during the sleepless night that followed. And once, when some word or look of Nelly's having appealed more powerfully than usual to his sympathy, he stooped to impress a fatherly kiss upon her forehead, the poor child's unnatural calmness gave way beneath the unexpected caress, and she found temporary relief in a prolonged fit of weeping.

But this kind of thing could not go on for ever. Christmas-day had come and passed, and been held as drearily as it is possible to hold that festival when unaccompanied by either peace or good-will, when one bitter morning in January, Dr Monkton awoke at early dawn to see his wife standing in her night-dress at his bedside, whilst he could just distinguish in the gray light that her lips were moving. At first he imagined she was walking in her sleep, and addressing her in a low voice, desired her to go to bed again; but the next moment he saw she was awake.

"It is of no use my going to bed!" she answered, in a low hollow tone, "I cannot sleep—I cannot rest—James! I have come to tell you I must go!"

"Go—go where?" he exclaimed, angry now that he found his disturbance had not been unintentional; "what the deuce are you talking about?"

"I must go to Bertie," she said, still speaking as though she were asleep. "Something has happened to him, and I cannot find out what it is. It cannot be death, because I am still alive; but he is in some distress or danger. He wants me—he is calling for me—and I must go at once."

"Pooh! you've been dreaming," replied her husband. "Get into bed, Helena, and let's have no more of this nonsense. You'll catch cold standing about in your night-dress;" and then perceiving that she made no effort to follow his advice, he started up from his pillow and repeated angrily, "Do you hear what I say to you? Get into bed at once—and hold your tongue. As if it wasn't enough that a man should spend half his nights abroad in weather like this, but he must be waked up at six o'clock in the morning to listen to such folly."

But Nelly had lost all fear of her husband's anger. Instead of doing as he bid her, she moved slowly away to another part of the room, and commenced in a mechanical manner to put a few articles of dress together.

"What are you doing there?" exclaimed Dr Monkton, presently.

"I am going to Bertie!" she answered, in a dreamy voice.

He started from his bed, and coming beside her, seized her wrist.

"It is no use doing that, James," she said, quietly; "it is of no use trying to keep me here by force. My heart tells me that Bertie is calling for me, and I shall only die by inches if you will not let me go. You cannot separate us—we are one."

"And so are we," he answered, "in the sight of law, if not of Heaven. As you shall find, Helena, if you attempt to disobey me, to your cost. On the day your brother left us, I told you that with my consent you should never hold any communication with him again. What I said then I meant. You have not done it, and you shall not do it whilst I live to prevent you."

She looked into his face, and reading there the truth she had suspected, tore her wrist from his grasp with the strength engendered of a sense of wrong, and turned upon him like a fury.

"You have heard from him!" she exclaimed. "You know where he is and what he is doing. I read it in your eyes—and you have kept the news from me! Oh! shame on your cruel heart!"

He leant against the bed-post, and smiled sneeringly at her despair.

"Your abuse has not the least power to affect me," he replied, "nor do I wish to deny the truth of what you say. I *do* know your brother's present address—have known it all along, and have no intention of revealing it to you. He had the politeness to tell me on the day we parted, that you would never have been my wife except from hope of the advantages which a residence here held out to himself. I know it to be the truth. I suspected it at the time I married you; I have been sure of it since you have been separated from him. However, it would not be reasonable of you to expect to have it all your own way. You have had your share of benefit from the arrangement; now comes my turn. You enjoyed your brother's company for five months; you must see how long you can make yourself contented with only mine. For what I said before, Helena, I emphatically repeat: you shall never see, nor speak with him again!"

"You cannot separate us," she rejoined; her expression relapsing into one of weariness. "If you lock me in a room, James, I shall die at the same time as Bertie. There is but one life between us!"

"Fiddlesticks!" he said contemptuously—"I leave the belief of such stories to old women and fools—I shall not be in the least afraid of your dying when your brother does, for from all I have heard he is most probably dead at the present moment."

He expected to hear her scream or see her faint at this an-

nouncement, but she did neither. She did not even seem to be moved by it, but remained unshaken in her own belief.

"No! he is not," was all she said. "Bertie is not dead, but he is longing for me—every day and every hour."

"Oh! I am glad you know so much about it," said Dr Monkton, sarcastically, "as of course you can need no further information from me. And as you seem so clever at divining, you will the more readily understand that I am in earnest when I say, that whether he is alive or dead, you must give up all idea of seeing your brother again."

"I can't do that," she said, shaking her head; "I don't care what becomes of me, but I must go to him."

"But you *shall not* go to him," repeated her husband, furiously. "He has insulted me as no man ever dared to do before; and if you presume to disobey my orders by attempting to hold any communication with him, I will never own or shelter you again. Thwart me in this—run counter to my express command—and you leave this house, as he did, never to return!"

The threat appeared to have no power to alarm her; not a muscle of her face moved as it struck upon her ear. She only looked wearily at the breaking dawn.

"Do you hear me, Helena?" demanded Dr Monkton; "do you understand what I say?"

"Yes! I both hear and understand you," she answered, in a low voice.

"Well! mind you obey me then, in this, as in all things, and as a preliminary, go back into your bed and remain there until the proper hour for rising."

To his surprise, she walked across the room, and did as he desired her; but though he followed, neither of them spoke another word, and at his usual time Dr Monkton rose and went into his dressing-room. His wife did not meet him at the breakfast-table, but he thought it best to make no comment on the omission. She had heard his fixed determination, and knew he meant to act upon it; for one day it would be best perhaps to leave her to digest it at her leisure. But when his hours for home consultation were over, and he had driven away in his smartly-appointed brougham, Nelly came down-stairs, attired for a walk, which quite charmed the heart of Elizabeth the housemaid, who had been trying in vain for many days past to persuade her to take some exercise.

"You look sadly pale, ma'am," she said, as Nelly passed her in the hall, "but I do hope as the fresh air will put a little life in

you—for it's a beautiful morning;" and her mistress thanked her for that, and all her previous kindness, with a fervour that surprised her. It was a beautiful morning, as the servant had remarked, but Nelly kept her veil down closely as she hurried as fast as her failing strength permitted her, through the High Street of Hilstone, and turned into the less frequented road which led to the railway station. There was one thing in which Dr Monkton had never stinted her, and that was money; and her purse held more than sufficient to enable her to carry out the one purpose she entertained—to go to London in search of Bertie.

No thought of the difficulties she should encounter on the way had power to deter her. Although she had parted with his card to old Aggie, she had the name of Nigel Brooke's club graven on her mind, and her object was to seek her cousin's aid, and, hand in hand with him, to ransack the town until they lighted on the house which held her brother.

When she arrived at the station, a bell was ringing furiously.

"Now then, miss!" exclaimed a frantic porter, as she entered the station room; "train's just a-going; have you got your ticket?"

"No!" she replied, quietly.

The porter was disgusted at her indifference. "Just like them women!" he inwardly ejaculated; "thinks the world's made for 'em, and that everything must bide their convenience.—Well, then, you'll lose your train," he said aloud, "for she's just off;" and as he spoke, with a scream and a whistle, the line of carriages moved slowly away.

"There ain't another to Stokely for the next four hours," said the porter, with malicious satisfaction, as her eyes followed the departing conveyance.

"I'm going to London," she replied, with a heavy sigh.

"Why didn't you say that before, miss?" said the official, aggrieved to think his sarcasm should have been so wasted; "the next up train's due in fifteen minutes, but you can't take your ticket till the Headley train's passed. So the best thing you can do is to rest yourself in the waiting-room till that's come in."

She looked so young and so sadly tired, that for all her fancied stupidity, the porter's eyes followed her with compassion as she wearily dragged herself to the place indicated.

When she procured her ticket, and found her way again upon the platform, the train for London had arrived, and she had no further difficulty in proceeding.

Two hours of weary travelling, during which she scarcely dared raise her eyes, lest some fellow-passenger should speak to

or recognise her, and she was landed at one of the large London terminuses, amidst an army of porters, omnibuses, and cabs.

Nelly had heard much of London; of its great extent, continuous traffic, and overflowing population, but she had had no idea that one of its stations alone could be so busy a scene as now presented itself to her. Numbers of people bustled past her, too hurried even to look up as they collected their luggage, fought for the cabs, or vehemently disputed their fares. She alone seemed to have no aim or object, as she wandered listlessly up and down the platform, too nervous to speak to any of the officials, and yet quite ignorant of how to procure what she wanted, without their aid.

"Any luggage, miss?" demanded a porter, as he noted her bewildered look.

She shook her head and passed him, only wishing she had had courage to speak.

"Cab, miss?" shouted a hansom, hailing her with his whip; but she thought he might be addressing some one else, and did not like to answer him.

At last the platform was, comparatively speaking, empty; another train was due upon the next line of rail, and most of the porters had crossed to receive it. The cab-stand also was nearly deserted, and when Nelly was next asked if she did not need a conveyance, she mustered courage to walk up to the vehicle, and address the driver—

"Cabman! can you take me *anywhere*?"

The sad eyes and the wistful face, no less than the apparent absurdity of the question, made the man think for a moment that the lady who spoke to him was not quite right in her mind, but if so, he considered, there was sure to be a reward offered for her recovery in a day or two, and he might as well earn it as any one else.

"To be sure, miss," he replied, "jumping off his box; .. anywhere you like; all round the world, if it's your pleasure."

"I want to go to the ——" she said, naming one of the large West End clubs: "do you know where that is?"

"To be sure, miss—all right—jump in!" replied cabby, to whom this request seemed but a confirmation of his previous surmise. He put her into his vehicle, and rattled her off to the place indicated. When he stopped, it was in a large square, and he came round to the cab-window, and pointed out a tall melancholy-looking building, at the opposite side of the road, to Nelly's notice.

"That there's the club, miss! Now, who may you want to see there?—no ladies admitted, you know."

"Oh! are they not, really?" she inquired; "may I not just go up the steps to ask a question?"

"Better not, miss!" replied the cabman, shaking his head; "I can give a message as well as you could say it yourself."

"Then will you please inquire if Mr Brooke is there—Mr Nigel Brooke, of Orpington."

"Ain't in the Club at present," was the reply, delivered a minute afterwards.

"Then ask them for his other address—his private address," said Nelly, confidently; "they must know where I can find him."

"They don't know nothing of his private address, miss," was the disheartening answer, "and he ain't been there for days."

"Then I must wait till he comes," she passively replied, as she leant back in the cab, and folded her hands; "I must wait here till I see him—it can't be long."

"But it may be ever so long," argued the driver, who did not relish the idea of standing about in the cold; "you'd best let me drive you somewheres, miss, and leave your address for the gentleman."

"I have nowhere to go to," said the girl, sadly. "I have no other friend in London but himself. I must wait here till he comes;" and she seemed quite resigned to an indefinite delay.

"Knew she was cracked!" soliloquised the cabman, as he walked to and fro, and embraced himself with a view to promoting his circulation; "was sure of it, the first moment I clapped eyes on her;" and then he ran away to get a glass of beer—and then he trotted to and fro again—and then he consulted his silver watch, and found that his horse had already been standing for an hour in the cold. "Look here, miss!" he said, leaning confidentially upon the window-sill; "I should be very sorry for to put you to any inconvenience, but my hoss has been standing here for better than an hour, and we shall both be frozen if we keep still much longer. 'Tain't a day for this sort of work, to say nothing of my being able to make double the money by moving about; so, if you're bent upon stopping here, which is quite contrary to the advice I'd give you, you must let me put you into another cab, for I've had enough of this job, and that's the truth!"

But as he was speaking to her, a light flashed into the patient eyes of his fare, such as he had not seen there before, and her little hands tried hard to push his burly figure on one side.

"Oh! stand away, please, do stand away!" she said, with ex-

cited utterance. "Don't you see, there he is, coming along the pavement? Nigel! Cousin Nigel, don't pass me; I am here!"

The last words were spoken loudly, and in another moment, one of two gentlemen who had been walking arm-in-arm as she had indicated, rushed across the road and opened the cab-door.

"Nelly!" he exclaimed. "Good God! is it possible that I see you? Have they permitted you to come at last; but what are you doing *here*, and by yourself?"

"Oh, Nigel!" she said, clinging to him, "no one has given me leave; no one knows that I have come—I ran away alone. Bertie wants me, I am sure he does, but I don't know where he is, and I came here to see you, that you might find him for me."

She spoke and looked so wildly, that the cabman was more than ever convinced that she was not in her right mind, and even Nigel Brooke had a passing fear lest distress and grief should have unsettled her.

"You will come with me, will you not?" she said, imploringly, as she marked the expression in his eye. "You will come and help me look for Bertie?"

"Of course," he answered; "give me one moment to speak to the friend whom I have left, and I will go with you, Nelly, to the world's end," and after he had done as he desired, he directed the cabman where to drive, and entering the vehicle, sat down by her side. She lay back in her corner of it, gazing at him as though he had been her guardian angel.

"We will find him together, Cousin Nigel, will we not?" she said, after a pause. "Oh! they have been cruel—so cruel—to me since he left. They have kept back all his letters, and never given me one scrap of news about him. They have nearly killed me, Nigel! and if it had not been for the hope of meeting him again, I *should* have died."

"Poor child!" he said, as he observed her wasted looks, and held her burning hand in his. "If I can call him to account for this, I will!"

"Do you think we are *sure* to find him?" she said alluding to her brother. "He is very ill, and wants me; I have known that for weeks; but they would not tell me so, nor give me his address."

"Then how can you possibly have known it, Nelly?" asked her cousin, in surprise.

"By what I have felt here," she said, pressing her hand upon her heart. "Something here has been dying in me slowly for weeks past."

"Then you are quite prepared to find your brother ill?"

"Quite," she replied, sadly, "for I know he is."

"You have guessed the truth, unfortunately," said her cousin.

"Then have you seen him, Nigel,—have you seen and spoken to Bertie? Ah! I knew, I felt you would if you received that card."

"I have been in close communication with him, dear Nelly, for a month past. I am taking you to the house where he now lies. He is very ill, but I have nursed him through his illness, and we are reconciled to one another. He has wanted nothing—rest assured of that—except the sister I am taking to him now."

He uttered these sentences slowly, but with the tenderest feeling, and Nelly, upon hearing them, had no power to ask the questions which she longed to put, but could only ejaculate "Thank God," and express her gratitude through tears.

In a few minutes more the cab had stopped before a handsome house in Curzon Street, which Nigel Brooke had hired for his mother and himself. The cabman threw open the door of his vehicle noisily, as cabmen will, and as Nelly followed her cousin into the hall, a gentleman (in whom, to her amazement, she recognised their guardian, Mr Ray) issued from a room on the ground floor, with his finger on his lip, to deprecate so unusual a disturbance; but when he saw by whom Nigel Brooke was accompanied, he dropped his hand again from sheer surprise, and would have detained and spoken to her, had not Nelly hurried past him. She felt that where he had come from, Bertie lay, and she had no time, no thought, for any other recognition. Closely followed by her cousin, she pressed into the room, in which, though several people were assembled, she saw but one object, the form of her twin brother, wasted—ah! how wasted!—yet alive, and from his glad, expectant look, already waiting her.

With a cry, which was born half of sorrow and half of joy, Nelly sprang forward, and clasped him in her arms; and then there followed a deep silence, which everybody present felt too sacred to be broken. Bertie himself was the first to speak.

"I have—waited—for this—darling!" he faintly whispered. "I only—waited—till you—came!"

Then, placing one wasted hand in the clasp of Nigel Brooke, who stood beside his bed, he put the other fondly round his sister's neck, and drawing her head downwards till their faces met, placed his cold lips against her own, and so died!

CHAPTER LII.

IN WHICH NELLY LEARNS THE HISTORY OF HER BIRTH.

THE disinclination which he naturally felt to meet his Cousin Nelly after her marriage, was not the sole reason that had induced Nigel Brooke to leave the Chase. It was the most powerful, perhaps, but not the most urgent. *That* was connected with his mother.

Mrs Brooke has already been represented as a weak-minded and frivolous woman, partial to the society of people much younger than herself, and very open to flattery.

Deprived of the companionship of Nelly Brooke, and having quarrelled with her "charming" doctor, she was not long in finding candidates for her favour, to supply their places, amongst whom was a certain Major Hazell, a man of about the age of her own son, who, from being at first simply intimate at the Chase, became by degrees so particular in his attentions to the old lady, that it was evident he intended to make her a proposal of marriage. At this prospect, which was patent to all, Mrs Brooke simpered like a girl of seventeen, whilst Nigel felt nothing but annoyance.

Although his father had seen fit to bequeath the bulk of his large fortune to himself, he had left his widow sufficiently independent to render her money an object of attraction to a penniless man like Major Hazell, who would not, so Nigel guessed, be particular to a shade about the age of the woman he married, so long as her income was enough to keep him in comfort. And although she was silly and vain, and often the cause of vexation to himself, it distressed Nigel Brooke to think that his mother should become, at her time of life, the prey of an adventurer, for with his present intentions towards her, he could think of Major Hazell in no other light.

To reason with Mrs Brooke, however, was all that he could do, and reasoning was of no avail; she either could not, or she would not, see that the idea of anything like love passing between herself and a man of Major Hazell's age was absurd, and the slightest allusion to his probable object in courting her was sufficient to bring down such a storm of tearful reproaches, that her son was not tempted to try the effect too often. Then he had hoped that a removal from Orpington might turn her thoughts into another direction, or divert those of her professed admirer, and it was partly for that reason, and wholly with that wish, that he had taken the house in Curzon Street which they then occupied; not that their departure from the Chase had had the effect which

he desired, for Major Hazell had followed them to London a few weeks afterwards, and made a formal proposal of marriage to Mrs Brooke, which she as formally had accepted; so that, added to her former airs and graces, Nigel had now the further mortification of seeing his mother ape all the blushing modesty of a young *fiancée*, and engaged day after day in amassing a magnificent wardrobe in which to appear under her new condition.

He had tried all he could to dissuade her from taking such a step, and he had failed; there was nothing left to be done but to put as good a face upon the matter as he could.

He had been in the thick of the annoyance caused by this occurrence, when one day, on calling at his club, an ill-spelt and almost illegible note, which old Aggie had got some one to trace for her on a dirty piece of paper, was put into his hand, with the intimation that a very old woman had called four or five times at the club in order to see him, and on the occasion of her last visit had left that behind her, to be given to him as soon as possible.

Having heard nothing of his cousin's arrival in London, or of his quarrel with Dr Monkton, Nigel Brooke was at first totally at a loss to understand *who* it was that presented her "humbel respects" to him, or so earnestly entreated him to visit her young master, at his lodgings in one of the dirty little thoroughfares that intersect the Strand; and had it not been that the last sentence informed him it was by "mis nely's" desire that the request was made, he would probably have considered the communication as some hoax, not worthy his attention. But those magic letters (when he had guessed the name they were intended to represent) were all-sufficient to command his immediate services.

Within an hour of receiving the unsightly scrawl he was at the given address, hearing a roundabout statement of the whole proceeding from the quivering lips of poor old Aggie, who felt certain that Miss Nelly must either be dead or dying, at Hilstone, because she had never forwarded the box of clothes she had promised, nor answered the letters Master Robert had sent her.

The accounts of "Master Robert" himself were very unsatisfactory. His summary dismissal from the doctor's house, and the subsequent silence of his sister, appeared to have had a most unfavourable effect upon his mind and behaviour. From the nurse's story, he seemed to be spending more money in a night than ought to suffice him for a month, and to be living in a round of low dissipation which must eventually prove as fatal to his health as it already had to his respectability. To hear all this grieved Nigel Brooke exceedingly, for Nelly's sake far more

than for his own ; for he knew how keen a grief the knowledge of such conduct on her brother's part would be to her.

That she should not have written, or in any way noticed Bertie's letters, was at that time as incomprehensible to him as to old Aggie. But before the nurse had finished her narration, her listener had formed two resolutions. One was, to rescue Robert Brooke from his present life of folly, the other to communicate the sad effects which the estrangement had had upon him to Dr Monkton.

And the latter task, although, to Nigel Brooke, by far the most unpleasant of the two, was as faithfully performed as was the former. He wrote to Dr Monkton, not once, but a dozen times ; not only when he first found out that Robert Brooke was on the road to ruin, but when, after the wretched boy, borne down by disappointment and a reckless disregard of health, was stretched upon his dying bed, and in a condition to excite the sympathy of the coldest heart on earth.

By that time, Nigel Brooke, by dint of perseverance in his charitable undertaking, by dint of gentle reasoning, of appeals to his love for his twin-sister, and by repeated acts of kindness from himself—had succeeded in touching some hidden spring in Robert's nature, and effecting a complete reconciliation between them. How it came about the lad himself could never say ; but he knew that he had been very obstinate, and very broken down by sickness and despondency, before he could accept the hand so cordially extended by his cousin, or consent to be made comfortable at his expense.

But when that day arrived—a happy day for Nigel,—and he bore poor dying Bertie and his faithful nurse to Curzon Street, the breach was healed, and perfect confidence restored ; and from that time until his death Robert Brooke could never sufficiently reproach himself for the estrangement which he had caused between them.

Meanwhile no letter came from Dr Monkton, until his correspondent (unable to account for so ungentlemanly a disregard of his repeated communications) expressed in writing his intention of going down to Hilstone to learn the reason.

Then he received an answer, but couched in such terms as he had thought no man who deserved the name would have written of another. In it Dr Monkton detailed the affronts he had received from Robert Brooke, and the effect which separation from her brother had had upon his wife, and without noticing the fact of the young man's approaching death, which Nigel had strongly urged

upon his consideration, emphatically refused to allow Nelly to go to see her brother, or even communicate with him.

It was a case in which a cousin's authority was useless.

Nelly belonged to her husband, and was under his control, and the only way in which Nigel could assist her was to entreat Dr Monkton, by every persuasion in his power, to alter his determination, which he continued to do, until he received a final refusal, conveyed in so curt and peremptory a manner as to forbid his making another attempt. Meanwhile every excuse that could be thought of was made to poor Bertie for the prolonged delay in his sister's appearance, until at last he had grown too weak to be able to think or feel very strongly upon any subject, although he never relinquished the fixed idea that he should see her again before he died. When it was evident that his cousin's end was drawing near, Nigel Brooke had written to his guardian, Mr Ray, to come and say farewell to him, and things had arrived at this pass when he so unexpectedly encountered Nelly in the cab outside the club, and conveyed her also to her dying brother's side.

It was a long time before the girl was in a proper state to hear all this herself.

For many days after Bertie's death she was unfit to be spoken to ; for weeks she could not listen calmly to any particulars concerning his illness ; and months had passed before she was fully persuaded that she also was not going to die and be laid by his side in the quiet grave in Little Bickton churchyard, where, at her express desire, Nigel Brooke and Mr Ray had conveyed her brother's body.

But when she was able to converse with old Aggie on the subject, and to listen to the nurse's details of her cousin's generosity and kindness, she felt as though she could never love him sufficiently in return for what he had done.

At the same time she asked to hear the history of her own and brother's birth.

"Tell me all about it, Aggie !" she had said on that occasion, "and don't be in the least afraid of wounding my sensibility ; whilst my darling was here I felt the shame of it for his sake, but now that he is gone, nothing can ever give me pain or pleasure, and I should like to know the whole truth before I meet him again."

"Well then, my deary !" replied the old woman : "You've heard me say, a many times, how that I nursed your poor mamma before ever you and Master Robert was born. Your grandpapa didn't live at Little Bickton then, Miss Nelly, but at

a village not any bigger, in the lower parts of Devon, of which he were the rector. He were married twice, you know, and when he took his second wife his son by his first lady (which was Mr Nigel's father) was fast growing up into a young man. Well ! after a year or so your poor mamma was born, and lor' what a fuss they did make over her ; I don't believe never a baby was made such a fuss about before, and as she grew older she was that spoilt there was no holding her.

" I wouldn't wish to say a word against her, Miss Nelly, and she dead and buried now, poor young thing, nigh upon twenty years ; but still you wishes to hear the whole truth, and her wilfulness was much at the bottom of it all.

" She wouldn't mind your grandpapa nor your grandmamma, no more than if they'd never spoke to her ; and so you may believe that she didn't mind anything what *I* might say. Indeed, she were mostly as contrary as she could stand, and I believe the only body that could in the least control her was her big brother, Mr Nigel's father.

" He had married a few years after your grandpapa took his second wife, and there warn't so much difference between the ages of their children, not more than a matter of four or five years perhaps, and so, in course, he looked upon Miss Helen quite as a child, and never failed to speak to her when he see fit, which used to bring words sometimes between his father and himself.

" Well, she grew up, Miss Nelly, until she was close upon seventeen, tall and straight as a poplar, but as unlarned as any cotter's girl, for she never would apply herself to her books, and her papa let her do just as she chose.

" She was very pretty, prettier than yourself, which is saying a great deal, to my mind, though I never liked her face as well as I do your'n, my deary ; you've more the look of your poor papa, to say the truth, for though strangers took you to be so similar, Master Robert was the most like his mamma, and I always thought so.

" Miss Helen, she seemed never at home, but was always tearing about the lanes on her pony, or wandering in the woods, as wild as the pony itself when it was turned out to grass.

" It was just at this time that she made the acquaintance of a young gentleman, very little older than herself, who was living in a neighbouring town. He wasn't in the army exactly, but he was studying for it under a master, and expected to join a regiment very shortly.

" How your poor mamma come to know him first, I can't tell

you, but he called at the rectory one afternoon, and then it seemed that they had met each other before, and was well acquainted. Your grandmamma made the young gentleman as welcome as she did everybody, so did your grandpapa ; so from that day he was for ever riding over to see them ; and he and Miss Helen, they used to go away together into the woods and fields, and read poetry and such like rubbish, and sometimes not come back for hours together.

“ When Mr Nigel’s father, who was a merchant and living up in London, come to hear of all the nonsense that was going on between his sister and this young gentleman, he was very angry, and he come straight down into Devon and spoke to your grandpapa about it. But lor’, Miss Nelly, what manner of use was that ? You know what your grandpa was of late years, my dear, and though I don’t mean to say he was quite so bad in the days I speak of, yet he never took much notice of anything which lay out of his parish business ; he did go so far, I believe, as to tell your grandmamma that he thought Miss Helen was getting a little too much liberty in the matter, but she only smiled at his fears, and said they was just a boy and girl together, and no possible harm could come of it. And so things went on in the same way till the young gentleman’s time was up, and he had to go to some foreign place, Malta I think they called it, for to join the army, and when your grandpapa and grandmamma see how Miss Helen took on at his departure, I think they was a little pleased to think as he was really a going.

“ For you must remember, Miss Nelly, that in consequence of his being such a lad, and almost from school like, there hadn’t been no talk of marriage between them, nor any thought of such a thing, so far as your grandpapa wished or we could tell. But the young gentleman hadn’t been gone more than a few months before we servants began to see as there was something very wrong in the house. Your grandpapa, who wasn’t a young man by that time, Miss Nelly, he seemed to break down all of a sudden, and your grandmamma went about as if she was going mad with grief, and Miss Helen, she warn’t much better, poor thing, as she had little need to be ; for after a bit it all come out, though I can hardly tell you how, that she had got into trouble and shame such as had never been heard on in that house before.

“ The news of his sister’s disgrace was sent, I suppose, to Mr Nigel’s father, for what did he do but go straight off from London to Malta in a ship, and without consulting your grandpapa on the subject, invited the young gentleman (which was your

poor papa, you know, my dear) to fight him with pistols, as was then the fashion.

"And now, Miss Nelly, this is the part of the story for which your uncle has always had so much blame thrown at him, but I can't see it in so bad a light myself. Your poor papa was doubtless very young and thoughtless (I believe he was about come of age at the time), and the difference of years between them went a great deal towards making up the noise there was about it; but still the truth remained, that he had brought his sister into trouble, and no gentleman, I am sure, ever dreamt of blaming Mr Nigel's father for doing as he had done. Poor Master Robert used to say (as I've often heard him) that his uncle had *murdered* his father; but 'twasn't the case, Miss Nelly, and, poor dear, he came to acknowledge that he had deceived himself before he died. They met, and fought a duel, it is true, and the young gentleman (who was an honourable good lad, I dare to say, or he wouldn't have left such a child as you behind him) was so overcome by the shame of what he had done, that he fired his pistol in the air, but Mr Nigel's father, not knowing that such was his intentions, took a straight aim, and shot him right through the heart.

"But what made the worst quarrel between your grandpapa and your uncle, Miss Nelly, was the fact that after the poor young gentleman's death, a sealed letter was found in his portmanteau, directed to your mamma, in which he said he never should forgive himself for the injury he had done her, and that he was going to get leave to England as soon as might be, and marry her straight off.

"And I believe he come of a very high family, and would have been a lord some day, if he had only lived long enough, and had a power of money into the bargain. And that's what Master Robert used to be a-thinking of when he said that, had it not been for his uncle's violence, you and he would have been as well off, or better, maybe, than his cousin were. So your grandpapa had two disappointments to contend against; the loss of such a grand marriage for his daughter, and the loss of her good name into the bargain.

"Well, my deary, it was but three or four months after that you and your poor brother came struggling into this world of misery, but sad changes had took place even before then. Your grandpapa and uncle had come to such shameful words that they had parted with many a wicked oath never to speak to one another again; and it wasn't long before we heard that Mr Nigel's father had gone off to the Indies with his wife and son, with the intention of setting up in business there.

"Then came your grandmamma's death, which was terrible

sudden, owing to her having the heart disease, and being unable to contend with so much trouble ; and your poor mamma, who had never rightly held up her head since the news of her misfortune got abroad, and who felt her own mother's death sadly, she just waited to give birth to you two poor helpless babies before she flickered out of life herself. That was the last stroke to your grandpapa. I think if Miss Helen had been spared, however much ashamed he may have been of her, he would have tried to rub on somehow ; but it didn't seem at first as if he could ever believe that she was gone.

"But directly the mould was filled in over her coffin, he left being a clergyman, and gave up his house and his living, and moved off to Little Bickton with Master Robert and yourself. You always went by the name of Brooke, my dear, having no claim to any other, and so he used to give out as you were the orphans of a younger son who had come by a sudden death, and no one but myself and Mr Ray (who was an old college friend of his) ever guessed to the contrary. So that's how I came to be your nurse, Miss Nelly, my dear, for of all his servants, your grandpapa only took me to look after you both."

"And he couldn't have chosen a better friend for us, or a more faithful nurse, Aggie," said Nelly, as the story was concluded.

"Haven't you no curiosity to learn your father's name, my bird?" inquired the old woman, after a pause. She shook her head.

"No ! I have no wish to hear it, or to think of it ! I cannot feel as though I ever had a father. Thank you, Aggie, for what you have told me, but please never speak of it again. Perhaps I am hard-hearted ; but when I think of all the bitter misery which the knowledge of our birth afforded Bertie, I lose all sense of pity or compassion, and can only feel the shame of the recital."

CHAPTER LIII.

TAKE ME BACK TO LITTLE BICKTON.

ALTHOUGH sorely disinclined to hold any further correspondence with Dr Monkton, Nigel Brooke considered it his duty to inform him without delay of his wife's unexpected arrival in Curzon Street, and the subsequent death of her brother. The semi-conscious state in which Nelly then lay utterly forbid all idea of her immediate return to Hilstone, but her cousin expressed his

willingness to take her there as soon as ever she was fit to be removed, unless her husband should prefer coming to London to escort her home himself.

Sufficient had dropped from Nelly's lips, even in her half-wandering and disconnected sentences, to render him aware that a very serious estrangement had taken place between them, but he trusted that the girl's devotion to her brother, added to the real cause which she had had for fear, would, now that the bone of contention was removed, combine to soften her husband's heart towards her.

After a few days of uncertainty, however, he received an answer to his letter, written in the third person, in which Dr Monkton begged to inform Mr Brooke, that, as Mrs Monkton was fully aware, before she left her home, of the conditions attached to her taking such a step, he concluded that she did so without any desire of returning thither, whilst, for his own part, he had no intention of receiving her again.

This was discouraging, certainly, but at the time that he received it, the house (what with Nelly's illness and Bertie's impending funeral) was in such a state of confusion, that Nigel had not leisure to feel the indignation at the doctor's letter with which subsequent perusals inspired him.

For several weeks he let the matter rest, and then, for Nelly's sake, he felt that he must make another effort. For his own, he would but too gladly have kept her always under the same roof with his mother and himself, but however innocent, she could not live apart from her husband without incurring blame, which, as her nearest relative, it became his duty, if possible, to prevent; so that, when she was once more able to sit up and be reasoned with, he spoke to her upon the subject.

Her wasted figure and her drawn white face, looked so much the more white and wasted for her deep mourning robes, that Nigel's heart failed him as he thought of delivering her once again to the tender mercies of her husband, but he knew it was the right thing to be done, and he trusted to Providence to bless the right.

He had expected to hear her remonstrate against such a proceeding, or even utterly refuse to play her part in it, but on the contrary, it almost seemed a matter of indifference to her. She recoiled a little at the thought of encountering Dr Monkton, but was at that period so fully impressed with the idea that a few weeks, or at the most, months, would see her re-united to her brother, that it was of slight consequence where or with whom she spent the intervening time.

"Only it will be lost trouble, Cousin Nigel, I am afraid," she

said, "for he told me if I went, it should be never to return, and—you don't know him as I do."

"Circumstances have altered since then, Nelly!" was Nigel's answer, "and whether we succeed or not, you will have the satisfaction of feeling that you have done your duty."

Accordingly, he took her down to Hilstone on the following day, and leaving her at the "Sovereign," which was the principal hotel in the place, proceeded by himself to call on Dr Monkton.

They had travelled by an early train, and he was fortunate enough to find the doctor at home, busily engaged upon his luncheon. The meeting between the two men was necessarily formal, but for his cousin's sake, Nigel Brooke made it as civil as was in his power.

"You will doubtless guess my errand, Dr Monkton," he commenced. "Your wife is at this moment in the town, and willing to return to your protection, and I have come beforehand to ask if you are ready to receive her."

The doctor, who, at his visitor's request, had recommenced his meal, merely elevated his eyebrows as he replied—

"Indeed! but I thought I had made my intentions on this subject fully known to you, Mr Brooke!"

"I received a letter from you, certainly," said Nigel, "written under the smart of first hearing that your wife had disobeyed your orders, but I can hardly believe that you will keep to the determination which you then expressed. Nelly did wrong in leaving Hilstone, Dr Monkton, there is no doubt of that, but you will confess that you had given her provocation, in refusing to furnish her with any news concerning her brother's welfare."

"I do not suppose, Mr Brooke, that you are here to discuss so purely personal a matter as the cause of quarrel between Mrs Monkton and myself. It is sufficient for your satisfaction that you should know she left my house on the clear understanding that she was not to return to it, and I did not make such an agreement with the design of breaking it on the first opportunity."

"But think of her youth, Dr Monkton! Compared with men of our age, Nelly is almost a child! From her birth she has been devoted to her brother, as no one should know better than yourself."

"Pray, by that sentence do you intend to make any allusion to the reason for which your cousin did me the honour of accepting my proposals of marriage?"

At this question Nigel looked astonished.

"By no means," he replied. "Whatever my suspicions may

have been, I have never heard aught from either Nelly or her brother to make me think she had any motive for marrying you except the right one."

"Oh, indeed! They have been more reticent with you, then, than they saw fit to be with me. Neither Mrs Monkton nor her brother had any hesitation in averring that she took my name in order to minister to his dissipated tastes."

"Knowing her as I do, I can scarcely believe that to be the case," said Nigel, "but were it so, he is dead, and can never irritate nor disgrace you again. Can that fact have no power to alter your feelings with respect to your wife? She has felt the blow acutely, so much so, that you would be astonished to see the alteration grief has made in her. She holds the firm conviction (a fallacious one, I trust, but still true to her) that it will not be long before she follows him to the grave, and I think that in her present state of mind, a few kind words respecting her dead brother, and a little sympathy with her own trouble, would be enough to bind her once more to yourself. Surely it is worth the trial. Nelly has all the qualities requisite to make as devoted a wife as she has been a sister, and although she cannot live apart from you without having some slur cast on her good name, I do not urge these points on your consideration for my own sake as being connected with herself. My mother's house is open to her, and as long as I live I should for many reasons consider it a privilege to be permitted to assist her; so that when I say that it is my earnest wish to see you reconciled, I hope you will believe that I say it for your good more than for my own."

"I have not the slightest desire to deprive you of one of your advantages, Mr Brooke," exclaimed the doctor, as he rose from the luncheon-table, "and since you appear to reckon assisting your cousin, even to affording her a home, not the least of them, I beg to intimate that you will not find me put any obstacle in your way. Mrs Monkton is at liberty for the future to live where and with whom she chooses, so long as it is not with me."

Although Nigel Brooke had been speaking so calmly, and apparently with so little resentment, it had been a difficult matter from the commencement of the interview for him to keep his temper, and Dr Monkton's last speech thoroughly upset him. It was not so much the words used by Nelly's husband, as the sardonic expression of his face, and the slighting, sneering air in which he alluded to her, that so much nettled her cousin.

He saw the man now as she had seen him; worse than even *his* jealousy had ever pictured him to be; and felt what the poor child

in whose behalf he stood there must have undergone, when left entirely in the power of one who could look and speak of her like this.

"It is all very well, Dr Monkton," he said, rising also to his feet; "it is all very well of you to affect to cast off so entirely the woman whom you have sworn to protect and cherish. But the law does not permit you to do so. You cannot—for one act of rebellion, however aggravated—disown a wife who expresses herself willing to return to her allegiance. Since I have heard the terms in which you can bring yourself to speak of her, I should be as loath to place my cousin in your hands as you could to be forced to take her back again; but if she consents to resign that, of which you have no right under present circumstances to deprive her, I, as her nearest relative, shall expect you to make a suitable provision for her wants. Consent to do that (as you must consent), and I will prove myself as ready to convey her from Hilstone as I can answer she will be to go."

"Mrs Monkton had four thousand pounds settled on her at her marriage by myself," replied the doctor, "and I presume she will now inherit anything that her brother may have left behind him. Of so much I have neither the power nor the wish to deprive her; but she will get nothing more from me."

"And you can really resign her with so little feeling," exclaimed Nigel Brooke,— "a woman with such a capability for loving—with so large and true and innocent a heart?"

The doctor smiled sarcastically.

"You seem so well read in the catalogue of her virtues, Mr Brooke, that I think you had better appropriate them: I will make over my interest in them to you on the spot."

"I did not come here to be insulted, Dr Monkton, nor would I have borne as much as I already have from you, except for Nelly's sake—I wish you a very good morning. I see that by stopping here longer I shall only waste my time. What further needs to be settled between us can be best arranged through writing." And with a stiff inclination of the head Nigel Brooke quitted the room.

As he walked back to the hotel where he had left his cousin, his indignation burned fiercely within him. This was the man, then, to whom Nelly had chained herself for life, and to secure health and affluence for the poor body now rotting in the grave, to which it had descended all the quicker for its brief course of dissipation. Yet, much as he disliked and despised Dr Monkton, he could not believe but that his indifference was partly affected.

He was very obstinate, perhaps, or very much wounded at his wife's want of affection for him, and he had assumed that tone before a stranger of his own sex, in order to hide how deeply he was hurt. It could not be—it was impossible that any man could cherish so bitter and rancorous a hatred against a young affectionate girl, only because in the desperation of suspense she had dared to violate his will and seek a dying brother.

It was not in Nigel Brooke's power to realise such a feeling, and by the time he had again reached Nelly's presence he had almost persuaded himself that could she be brought face to face with Dr Monkton, all would yet be well between them.

She was seated in her old attitude, gazing fixedly upon the floor ; but as her cousin entered the room she slowly raised her eyes to his.

"I have not been successful, Nelly, I regret to say," he said, answering the look which met his own. "Monkton seems very obstinate and unforgiving ; but, perhaps, considering what has gone before, I am not the best mediator that could have been chosen between you."

"I told you so," she said, quietly. "I knew that he would not forgive me. He never forgives any one. Let us go back to London, Cousin Nigel—it is of no use staying here, and the very air of Hilstone seems to stifle me."

"But I am so unwilling to give up the chance, dear Nelly," he replied. "You are so young—you seem entirely to forget how great a disadvantage in the world's eyes it will be to you to be known to be living apart from your husband."

"Not so great as it would be in my own to be living with him under present circumstances," she said, in a low voice.

"But you would return to him if he consented to receive you, Nelly ; would you not ?"

"Yes, if you think it best, Nigel. I will do whatever you think right. It will be but a little while anyway, and I should wish to die at peace with him and all the world."

"Were you to ask Mrs Prowse to plead with him for you, might not that have a better effect than any words of mine ? She is a woman and a sister, and must feel for the suspense and anxiety which you passed through with regard to poor dear Bertie."

"Must I go to see her, then ?" asked Nelly, passively rising.

"I think it will be best, dear ; but you shall not go alone. I will order a fly, and take you there myself." And consequently, in another half-hour the cousins found themselves in the drawing-room of Mrs Prowse.

They had been told that she was in, but she kept them waiting a considerable time; and when she did appear, indignation was superadded to her usual snappishness. Following close upon her heels, but meekly, and as though he knew that he was disobeying orders, there came good Canon Prowse. As they entered, Nelly rose and advanced to meet them.

"Well! Mrs James!" exclaimed her sister-in-law, "*you* in Hilstone! I could hardly believe but that the servant had misinformed me. And to what may I owe the honour of this visit?" Nelly did not appear in the least intimidated by this address. She began to speak at once, slowly and distinctly, and with a pathos which went to the heart of both her male listeners.

"I have come, Mrs Prowse, because my Cousin Nigel thought it best I should do so"—(here Nigel Brooke and the Canon's wife exchanged a formal salutation)—"to ask you if you will speak to James for me. He is very angry with me, as I daresay that you know, and does not wish that I should return to live at Hilstone; but Bertie—my brother—is dead—and it will not be long before I follow him, and till that time comes, I should wish to do my duty, if I can. And perhaps James would believe this from you sooner than he would from me, or from my cousin."

These words were delivered so simply, that it was impossible for Mrs Prowse to affect to misunderstand them.

"You should wish to do your duty, Mrs James?" she echoed. "Well, that seems rather an extraordinary avowal, after your late behaviour. Running away from Hilstone in broad daylight, and creating such a scandal as was never heard of here before."

"My *dear*," put in the Canon, feebly expostulating.

"Well, Canon, and I repeat it, such a scandal as Hilstone had never witnessed before."

"But I went to Bertie," said Nelly, as calmly as at first. "I went to see my brother, and he was dying; I told James so before I started. I told him I must go, or I should die myself."

"Who you went to makes no difference," snapped Mrs Prowse; "the infamy lay in your presuming to go! And after *my brother* had commanded you not to stir from the house!"

"Pardon me, madam," interposed Nigel Brooke, "but I think the fact that my cousin went to her aunt's house, and to see a brother whom she believed to be dying, *is* some palliation."

"Of course, it is," said Canon Prowse, decidedly.

"It's none at all," shrilly exclaimed his wife, "and I'll thank you, Canon, to hold your tongue upon the matter. It's no business of yours, anyway. I say again, that Mrs James leaving

her home in the manner she did, was an infamous proceeding, and I certainly shall not be the one to try and persuade my brother to receive her back after it."

"If we begin to talk of infamy, madam," said Nigel Brooke, hotly, "what do you think of Dr Monkton keeping back all news of her brother's condition from his wife?"

"I think he was perfectly justified in doing so," she tartly replied; "the young man was a most dissipated young man; he was a disgrace to the establishment, and not a fit associate for any respectable person"—— But here she was stopped by Nelly, who, with burning cheeks, exclaimed——

"He is *dead*, Mrs Prowse, my dearest brother is dead and gone to heaven, and I will not hear the slightest odium cast upon his memory!"

Mrs Prowse tittered.

"I know he is *dead*, Mrs James, I have heard so far; but as to having gone to heaven"——

"Oh, shame! for shame!" cried Nigel Brooke.

"Be quiet!" shouted her husband, roused from his usual forbearance. She turned round upon them both like a spit-fire.

"How *dare* you speak to me in that way, young man? And as for *you*, Canon, if you presume to use such a tone towards me again, we will soon see which is master in this house."

"Come away, Nelly, come away," said Nigel, drawing his cousin's arm within his own. "I was wrong to subject you to such a scene as this!"

"Oh, indeed," sneered Mrs Prowse; "not good enough for her, I suppose. Not good enough company perhaps. We are not the tenants of Orpington Chase, Mr Brooke, I know, but at all events our fathers and mothers were married to each other, and we had a name, however humble, which we could call our own."

"Cousin Nigel, let us go!" said Nelly, for the first time showing something that was not indifference.

"Woman! will you be silent?" said the Canon, angrily, as he pushed his wife to one side. "Nelly, my dear girl, we part friends, do we not?"

She dropped her cousin's arm, and ran back to his side.

"You were always good to me, Canon Prowse," she said, "and so you were to my poor dead Bertie. God bless you for it!"

She put her hand in his, and pressed it firmly; and he stooped down as he had done once before, and kissed her forehead.

"Oh, indeed," tittered Mrs Prowse from the background. "I had no idea this kind of thing went on, or I should have been

quite jealous. Kissing ! well to be sure, it is just as well, I think, that my brother is so resolved to keep his word, or we should have Mrs James running off *in company* next time, instead of alone !”

But she had scarcely concluded her speech before the hall-door had slammed upon her visitors ; and the Canon, the meek and long-suffering Canon, who scarcely dared in usual say that his soul was his own, turned upon her, and with a suddenness which took her completely by surprise—boxed her ears !

Mrs Prowse could not believe her senses ; and particularly that sense which caused her sacred ears to ring.

The smartness of the attack had sent her spinning back into the drawing-room ; and as she heard the door of her husband’s study close and lock behind him, and felt that for the time being he had escaped her clutches, she had no resource but to sink down on the sofa, and find relief in a burst of angry tears.

“And now, Nelly, what are we to do next ?” inquired Nigel Brooke, as having conducted her back to Curzon Street, they entered once more upon the discussion of her prospects.

“Oh, take me back to Little Bickton, Cousin Nigel ; let me go back to Little Bickton to Mrs Weston, and the dear old farm, and live close to the spot where my poor darling lies.”

Mrs Brooke tried hard to reason her niece out of this plan. About to be married herself, and knowing that Nelly, as a married woman, could have no designs upon Nigel, nor Nigel upon her, she had been graciously pleased to resign her jealousy, and to return to her former opinion, that the girl would be a very pleasant and useful companion for herself. Indeed, she had gone so far as to tell her son that his Cousin Helena was certainly very much improved by her marriage, and that if dear Hazell had no objection, she thought she should often like to have her to stay with them after they had become one.

But Nigel did not second her design ; he was determined not to sanction it ; he even suggested that Nelly was too young and pretty to be a safe visitor in the house of so susceptible a man as his intended step-father ; an idea which gave his mother so much offence that she declined to enter on the subject again. But his real reason was scarcely less important. He was not afraid for Major Hazell’s peace of mind, but for his own.

He would have given worlds to have kept that dear companion, with her sweet, sad face, for ever by his side, but he dared not do it. He knew that his mother’s house would always be open to him, and he must be banished from it, if Nelly were admitted there. Even the short time he had lately spent in her society

had greatly disturbed the tranquillity which he had hoped he was learning to attain, and he could not risk it further, lest the future might hold something darker for them than he dared to contemplate. She was his cousin, it was true, and he her nearest relation ; but he could not forget that she was dearer to him than she should be, and the wife of another man ! And Nelly seemed instinctively to share his thoughts, and steadfastly resisting her aunt's entreaties, turned from them all to prefer the old petition.

"Take me back to Bickton ! for the little time before I join him (oh ! I hope and trust in Heaven's mercy that it will be but a very little time) ; let me live close to Bertie's grave, for I feel as though he missed me even there."

So she did as she desired. She went back to live in the old rooms at Bickton Farm, which Nigel would have beautified for her with modern furniture, had she allowed him (but she said, "For such a little while, what did it signify?"); and beneath the roof where Bertie had lived, surrounded by the friends whom Bertie had known, cheered by Mrs Weston and the Rays, and cared for by old Aggie, Nelly's bruised heart, after a while, began slowly, but certainly, to heal again.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE SPIRIT OF THUG IS AVENGED.

THE early spring had now arrived ; Nelly's flying visit to Hilstone, and her rejected offers of reconciliation, were things of the past, and every one who knew them was aware that a breach had taken place between the doctor and his young wife, so serious as to render it improbable that this world would see it healed again.

Of course there were various opinions on the subject. Some people were not slow to affirm that Mrs Prowse's temper must be at the bottom of the disagreement, for Nelly had been a favourite with most in Hilstone ; whilst others, who judged by hints thrown out by the Canon's wife herself, accredited the poor girl with sins her innocence had never dreamed of ; and there were those who even suggested that her character had not been all that Dr Monkton thought when he married her.

This circumstance, however, had scarcely furnished more than a nine days' wonder for the town of Hilstone, before it found something else, scarcely less remarkable, to feed its curiosity upon. Dr Monkton himself fell ill. It was the beginning of the

month of February when Mrs Prowse first observed an alteration in her brother's spirits, which all at once became visibly depressed—an unusual, almost unprecedented case with him. The possessor of feelings singularly blunt, James Monkton was not the man to undergo many changes of temperament. He was never known to be either very jocular or very melancholy; he had been often heard to say that the extremes of happiness or misery were as inexplicable to him as they were unknown. Therefore, when he fell into low spirits, the effect was as remarkable as it was unexpected. Not that he courted observation in the matter; on the contrary, he religiously shunned every allusion to the state of his private feelings, and showed considerable temper when his sister ventured to touch upon the subject.

But more than once she had suddenly come upon him sitting alone, with his face buried in his hands, and an inexplicable gloom upon his brow, and although each time he had immediately roused himself, he had not been able to prevent her detecting that it was by force alone that he thus dismissed some unusually painful recollection from his mind.

Mrs Prowse thought over this matter again and again, but by no possible means could she account for it: to her it was as mysterious as it was strange.

"I cannot imagine what is the matter with James!" she remarked one day, in a burst of unusual confidence to the Canon; "he is more melancholy and self-absorbed than I have ever seen him before—one would think he had something on his mind."

"Fretting about the quarrel with his wife, most likely," replied the Canon; "at least I am sure *I* should do so, were I in his place."

"Absurd!" said Mrs Prowse, tossing her head; "*my brother*, I would have you know, Canon, is not a man to do one thing and mean another; and what you would feel under the circumstances is no criterion whatever for James. If he had had (or was ever likely to have had) the least desire to be reconciled to Mrs James, he would not have stood so firmly in the matter as he did."

"Well! perhaps it's his conscience, then, which is pricking him," suggested her husband; "it ought to, if he possesses one."

"Canon!" exclaimed Mrs Prowse, indignantly, "do you know what you are talking about? I should think *my brother's* conscience was as clear as any man's. He has nothing to reproach himself with, I am quite sure."

"No?" said the Canon, incredulously; "well, I'm glad to hear you say so, my dear, and I hope that the doctor may be able to

give his conscience as clean a bill of health as you seem ready to do. Meanwhile, if his mind is so perfectly at ease, it seems strange to me that he should go sitting about in the way you describe with his head buried in his hands. It rather conveys an idea of self-reproach or misery to my mind; but perhaps I am mistaken, and it may only be the attitude of rejoicing innocence."

Mrs Prowse turned round like a cat upon her husband, but a look in his eye recalled her to herself, and she was fain to be content with flouncing out of his presence.

She had not forgotten the day on which she had insulted Nelly, and the remembrance of the indignity she had then received at the Canon's hands had still the power to make her ears tingle. It had been the commencement of a new era in both their lives. He had shown far less meekness and forbearance since that day, and she had been proportionately more humble. Her brother had proposed that they should again live together, as they had done before his marriage, and she had been anxious to do as he desired, and take up her residence in St Bartholomew's Street. But on this plan the Canon had laid a most decided veto.

He had gone further; he had not hesitated to tell the doctor what he thought of his late conduct and unforgiving spirit; and although he would not prevent his wife from visiting her brother's house, he absolutely refused to frequent it himself, or to accept any of the hospitalities tendered him from there. So that Mrs Prowse's sole satisfaction, with regard to No. 15, now consisted in bursting in upon the servants at untoward times, in order to detect their petty sins of negligence or disobedience; or appearing in the kitchen during meals, to the unmitigated disgust of the whole quintet, in hopes of finding that they were feasting on forbidden viands. Whenever she was fortunate enough to have some misdemeanour on their parts to relate, she carried the tale with alacrity to her brother; but as she had informed her husband, he had seemed lately to take no interest in anything, and she could not imagine what was the matter with him.

A few mornings after the conversation related, whilst Canon and Mrs Prowse were seated at their breakfast, a servant entered, to inform them that "Mr Long, from the doctor's, would be glad if he could speak with them for a minute."

Such a request on the part of "Mr Long," who generally avoided the house of Mrs Prowse as though it had been infected, was so unusual, that it provoked immediate curiosity, and the servant was desired to show him into the breakfast-room at once.

"Well, Long?" said Mrs Prowse, interrogatively.

Long waited a moment to make sure the other servant had had time to retreat; then opening the door to glance into the passage, closed it securely, and advanced into the centre of the room.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, in so low a voice that it might almost have been designated a whisper, "for the liberty that I take in interrupting you at your breakfast hour, but I am not quite easy, I regret to say, about my master."

"Your master!" exclaimed Mrs Prowse; "why, what of him, Long? Isn't he well?"

"I fear not, ma'am; but I dare not approach the subject with the doctor himself, on account of irritating him. I ventured to do so once, and he was annoyed with me,—I may say violent. But I am sure that he is ill, ma'am. He has neither eaten nor drank now, for two days past, and his dreams at night seem fearful. Since my mistress's departure I have slept, by my master's orders, in the further dressing-room, so as to be handy, and I hear him calling out sometimes to that degree that I can't close my eyes. My master complained also of great pain in his shoulder and the back of his neck this morning—indeed, he had to stop two or three times during dressing on that account; but he won't let me take any notice of it, and has gone his rounds as usual, though I'm sure he's more fit for his bed than to be out of doors."

"But what do you think is the matter with him, Long?" demanded the Canon.

"I can't say, I'm sure, sir, but the doctor has been very low in his spirits for some weeks past, as perhaps you may have observed, and I shouldn't wonder myself if a fever or something of that sort was coming on him."

"Well, the doctor ought to know his own symptoms best," observed Canon Prowse, "and if he refuses to take any notice of them, I can't see what is to be done about it."

"I thought, perhaps, sir," said Long, twisting his hat round and round in his hands, "that if Mrs Prowse would be good enough to speak to Dr Nash on the subject, he might be able to persuade my master to take more care of himself."

"Oh! I'm sure that wouldn't be of any use," replied Mrs Prowse, in her imperative manner. "Your master knows twice as much as Dr Nash, and is not likely to take *his* advice. But I'll step round at dinner-time this evening, Long, and see what's the matter with him myself."

Long bowed and withdrew, though he had little hope that a woman's advice would have much influence with his master.

When Mrs Prowse entered the dining-room of No. 15, at the

time appointed, she found her brother looking much worse than she had anticipated. But to her repeated inquiries as to what ailed him, he pettishly replied that it was nothing, that he had only a pain in his shoulder and back, proceeding from rheumatism.

"Oh, I hope you are not going to have rheumatic fever, James!" she exclaimed; "you seem so restless and uncomfortable to me, and your face is so flushed, that I shouldn't at all wonder if it were the case."

"I wish you'd stop your confounded croaking!" he said, angrily; "it's enough to make a man ill to hear the way in which you go on." The wine and dessert were on the table, but she observed that he sat with his back towards them, and was not drinking or eating as usual.

"Are you not going to take any wine, James?"

He rose then, but as though with an effort, and pouring out some sherry, attempted to raise it to his lips. But the next moment he dashed the wine-glass to the ground, and flew to the opposite side of the room, panting for breath and in a state apparently of the greatest terror. Mrs Prowse perceiving this action with much alarm, followed and attempted to sooth him, but he beat her off, and sank down on a sofa, gasping with agitation.

"James! what *is* the matter with you?" she exclaimed; "you must be very ill to go on like this. Let me send for Dr Nash or Mr Young. You may do yourself serious harm by delaying to take advice."

"Leave me alone!" he answered, in a harsh, thick voice, which was utterly unlike his own. "I want no doctors or advice. There is nothing the matter with me, I tell you, and all I wish for is to be left to myself."

"Oh! if that is the case, of course I will go," said Mrs Prowse, always but too ready to take offence; "but if you suffer for your negligence, don't blame *me*, that's all. Good-night to you!" And quitting the room, she returned to her own house. Meanwhile the wretched man whom she had left grew so much worse that before she had retired to rest, she received a second visit from Long, who with an expression of fear entreated her to summon Dr Nash to his master's aid, or to authorise him to do so.

"I am sure he ought to see somebody, ma'am, and that at once, for he's been rolling his head about in the curiousest manner all the evening, and stammering as though he couldn't find his tongue."

"Well, you must send for Dr Nash, then, and on your own responsibility, Long," snapped the affectionate sister, "for *I* don't intend to interfere again until I'm asked. I offered to do what

I could for your master this afternoon, and he refused my services altogether. You must act as you think best, for I will not venture to give you any authority in the matter."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Long, respectfully, though inappropriately; "then I *will* send for the other gentlemen, for I can't feel easy until I hear what their opinion of the case may be."

Accordingly, on pretence of transacting business of his own, Long crept out that evening to Dr Nash's house, and brought him at once to St Bartholomew's Street.

But Mrs Prowse did not go near her brother during the whole of the following day. He had offended her, and she desired he should learn that to do so was no slight thing.

On the morning of the day after, however, as she was passing the door of her husband's study, her curiosity was excited by hearing the sound of more than one strange voice within it; and she immediately stooped down to the keyhole to hear what they were talking about.

"I think that Mrs Prowse should be informed of her brother's danger," said a voice, which she recognised as that of Dr Nash.

"You think then, gentlemen, that the case is urgent," remarked her husband.

"Most decidedly so," was the reply from some stranger, "more than urgent; imminent, next to hopeless."

Then she was about to bustle in, eager for further intelligence, when, before she could resume an upright position, the door was suddenly thrown open. What the men thought of her, caught in the very act of listening to their conference, matters little; their minds were occupied at the moment with a subject of so much greater importance, that perhaps they never thought of her at all.

"My dear!" exclaimed the Canon, "these gentlemen were just inquiring for you. They have brought sad news with them."

"Relating to my brother?" she asked, quickly.

"I regret to answer yes," replied Dr Nash.

"What is the matter with him, doctor? Is it rheumatic fever, or scarlet fever, or what? I saw him the day before yesterday, and then he behaved in the most extraordinary manner to me."

"I am afraid you would think his actions still more extraordinary now," said her informant. "He is very ill, very ill indeed. Can you throw your thoughts back, Mrs Prowse, to a night in last November, when, as I understand, Mr Robert Brooke, the young gentleman lately dead, left your brother's house?"

"To be sure I can; but what of that?"

"On that night or morning," continued Dr Nash, "Monkton

shot a dog, I believe—a mastiff, which lay upon the landing.”

“Yes! a nasty, dangerous brute, which young Brooke had brought in on purpose to annoy him. But what possible connexion can that circumstance have with his present illness?”

“We fear it has too much. Did Dr Monkton ever tell you that the animal had bitten him?”

“Yes! now you mention it, he did. The dog seized his fingers as he was about to muzzle him, but the bites were scarcely to be called such. They were mere scratches, and healed directly.”

Dr Nash turned to the stranger, an eminent physician, whom he had summoned from London to his assistance.

“This account coincides with that of the servant,” he remarked. “I greatly fear that your suspicions are correct.”

“They are no longer suspicions with me,” replied the other, “they are certainties.”

“But what are you alluding to?” asked Mrs Prowse, whose curiosity was all alive. “You cannot mean to tell me that those little wounds can have any effect upon my brother’s health at this distance of time. Why, it happened nearly three months ago.”

“That makes no difference,” said the stranger; “the question is, in what state was the dog when shot?”

“Oh! I know nothing about the dog,” replied Mrs Prowse.

“We do, unfortunately, madam,” he rejoined; “we have inquired, and have every reason to dread that *rabies*, though perhaps undeveloped, was in its system at the time.”

At this surmise, which could not but convey a fearful meaning, even to a disinterested listener, the heart of the Canon’s wife seemed suddenly to stand still, and her face grew pale as ashes.

“And in that case?” she gasped.

“In that case, we fear that there can be no mistake about Dr Monkton’s symptoms, which all tend to suggest the idea that he is suffering from”——

“Not from—hydrophobia!” shrieked Mrs Prowse.

The stranger bowed his head. She fell back on the sofa, unable to articulate, and white with terror.

“But please to understand, my dear lady,” said Dr Nash, “that you must not give a hint of our suspicions to your brother. Soothe him by every means, and try to allay the fear which is creeping on him, that we are enemies instead of friends, but”——

“Oh! I couldn’t go to him. I couldn’t see him for anything,” exclaimed Mrs Prowse, “it would be the death of me, I know.”

“What! not when he so much requires you?” said Dr Nash.

"If any malady needs gentle soothing care, it must be a fearful one like this."

"But won't he be dangerous?" she urged, "and are you certain it is not catching?"

At this question the doctors could scarcely refrain from smiling as they assured her to the contrary.

"And he will have his servants with him, and we shall also be in the house," said Dr Nash; "but if you are really so timid, perhaps you will be of less use than harm."

But reassured as to the danger of her brother biting her, Mrs Prowse was curious to be upon the scene of action, and almost immediately departed with her husband for St Bartholomew's Street. On arrival, they were met by Long with a woeful account of the treatment he had undergone at his master's hands.

"He's as untractable to-day, ma'am, as a madman. He took a stick just now and threatened to hit me and John with it, and he won't take a drop of medicine, nor yet go into his bedroom, for fear we mean to imprison him. I got him to lie down on the bed just now, for he's had no sleep all night, but he hadn't been here above a minute or two, before he jumped off and ran into the passage, roaring out that he was suffocated, and calling for water in the most violent manner. And when I was bringing the jug along to him, he rushed at it and tried to dip his whole head in, and when he found he couldn't drink it, he smashed the jug to pieces, and flew at me like a wild thing. I hope the doctors are coming back soon, sir, for I don't half like being left alone with master, and no more will you, I think, when you see him."

"Where is he now, Long?"

"He's sitting on the landing, sir; I can't get him to move from the spot, and he's talking in a way to make one's flesh creep."

Canon Prowse had not seen his brother-in-law then for many days, and he was greatly shocked at his altered appearance. They found him as the man had indicated, sitting on the landing, talking to himself, with damp, matted hair, drawn face, wild glassy eyes wide open, and dry parched lips.

"Who is that pouring cold water on my head?" he called out, in accents of pain, as his sister and her husband ascended the stairs; "take these snakes from off me, Long. Clear away those large black things; why do you let them crawl over me in this manner?" and then, as no one appeared to obey his orders, he continued, plaintively, "Do as I tell you; don't stand there and let me be eaten up alive: whoever saw such animals on English ground?"

"He is raving," whispered Mrs Prowse, "he must be delirious."

Yet the next moment he had recognised them both, and his memory did not seem the least impaired, though he talked very slowly and with the rotatory motion of his head which the servant had before described to them.

"It's a long time since you've been here, Canon. I began to think we should never meet again. We quarrelled on that subject of Robert Brooke and his sister, didn't we? but it's just as well you have come to see me now, for I begin to think that I shan't get over this attack."

But then, as the Canon was about to approach and speak some words of comfort to him, he threw out his arms in the greatest agitation, exclaiming—

"Don't touch me! don't come near me, for Heaven's sake! If you attempt to touch me I will murder you."

His eyes rolled round again in the wildest manner, and he commenced to mutter and talk incoherently to himself, crying out at intervals: "Don't touch me! In God's name, don't lay a finger on me!"

Mr and Mrs Prowse, the one no less frightened than the other, beat a hasty retreat to the lower rooms, whence, in fear and trembling, they listened to the sick man's broken dialogue with his attendants, until the doctors again made their appearance.

But when they ascended the staircase in their company, they found the scene had changed. The unhappy patient had now conceived the idea that his brother professionals were about to poison him, and had locked himself into his bedroom, and all entreaty on their part that he should open to them was only met by the coarsest and most virulent abuse.

The elegant and suave Dr Monkton, who had never been known in his most impatient moments to say anything ungentlemanly, now levelled the vilest language at the heads of his friends, and defied them to enter the room without his consent.

"We can do no earthly good," said the London physician to Dr Nash, "therefore what is the use of irritating him? Let his servants and his friends pass through if he so wishes it, and we can watch him if we choose through the crack of the door."

Mrs Prowse could not be persuaded to re-enter her brother's presence, she was too great a coward, and had too little affection for him; but her husband accompanied Long into his master's bedroom, and was with the miserable man until the end.

He lay on his bed, his eyes and head constantly on the move, whilst he was so irritable that he could not bear to be touched, or even looked at. The idea that he had been poisoned evidently

possessed his mind, and he would not attempt to swallow either food or medicine, and often cried out that could he catch a sight of those two doctors he would murder them.

For the first time now he spoke of the mastiff, and connected his illness with the fact of having been bitten by him.

"The brute!" he exclaimed, "the nasty cowardly brute, to give me my death because I wished to muzzle him; but he had his desserts. I shot him. I shot him dead! But it would have been better, perhaps, if I had waited till Helena coaxed him off the landing. Where is Helena?" suddenly starting up. "Ah! I forgot; she's left me! They've all left me—or—did I make them go? It little matters now, but I am alone, all alone! Keep those two poisoners out of the room!" he shouted, with an oath which rang through the house; "if I catch sight of either of them again, I'll murder them as I did the mastiff."

Another night passed; a long weary night, during which he grew suddenly tractable, and talked sensibly for some time, but still complained of intense thirst (as he had done all along) and of great pain in his shoulder. His brother-in-law tried, more than once, to lead his thoughts to something higher than the things of earth, but his efforts were of no avail. Each time the subject was alluded to, Dr Monkton's face put on a sardonic smile, which seemed to say the time was past for his conversion, until the good Canon gave up the attempt in despair.

As night approached, his sister had gone home to her bed. She could be of no earthly use to him, she had argued, and she saw no reason in giving up her rest for nothing. So she slept soundly, doubtless, whilst James Monkton's life was ebbing painfully away, with no one at his side who loved him, or would mourn his dreadful death.

Canon Prowse was home himself before his wife had risen, and waked her with the news that her brother had departed.

"He became weaker every minute of the night," he said, in relating the occurrence, "and we hardly thought he could have lasted till the morning. At six o'clock he asked Long for some tea, but when it was brought to him, he only shuddered at the sight, and turned away. Soon afterwards, he raised himself in bed; I thought he was about to speak to me, and think so still, but before he could articulate a word, he fell back on his pillow and expired."

"Oh! my dear brother!" shrieked Mrs Prowse, in her most effective treble. "Oh! my dear, dear brother, this is a judgment on those wicked Brookes, for if it hadn't been for them and for

their horrid dog, he might have been alive and well this day. Oh! my dear brother James! my only brother James! what shall I do without him?" but finding that her lamentations increased in vehemence, until they were becoming patent to the entire household, Canon Prowse abruptly but judiciously closed the door upon them, and left his partner to weep and bewail her brother by herself.

There remains little more of this homely story to relate.

The reason of Dr Monkton's death, although hushed up as much as possible by his relatives, could not but get wind in such a place as Hilstone, and Mrs Prowse soon found, to her horror, that her brother's mantle was supposed in some mysterious manner to have fallen upon her, and that she was shunned by several of the residents, under the supposition that she was hydrophobic; but a greater misfortune befell her before long. Miss Laura Filmer, who had always entertained a predilection for the red-coats, took it into her head to run away with a subaltern of the 40th Bays, and as she had kept all her appointments with the gentleman under the pretence of visiting Mrs Prowse, her mother chose to believe that the Canon's wife had really had something to do with the elopement, and cut her accordingly, upon which Hilstone, no longer dazzled by the glamour of cathedral fame, opened its eyes, and taking her simply for what she was, an ill-tempered, snappish, spiteful little woman, permitted her at once to drop into her proper place, and become—what she deserved to be—nothing.

Meanwhile Mrs Brooke had married her Major, and gone out to India with him; and Nigel, averse to leaving his native land again, had disposed of his interest in the Calcutta business, and became a landed proprietor in Scotland instead.

When Nelly was first told of her husband's death, it seemed to affect her as little as did everything else. No thought of release from a chain which galled her, or dreams of a future which she might now indulge, entered her head. She had not felt the chain; she did not believe in the future; but one idea possessed her—that she was on her road to Bertie.

Day after day she would linger by his grave, and in the haunts which had been theirs together: she did not avoid the mention of his name, but she resented, as an insult, any supposition that they should long be parted. All his selfishness, his indolence, his disregard of her convenience, had faded from her mind. She could remember nothing but the mournful beauty of his counte-

nance, and the love which had been theirs. She thanked Heaven each night that she was one day nearer to his side ; she almost grudged the meat and drink which kept her life in her, and herself from him.

But it was not right, and it was not natural, that such a state of things should last. Little by little, though loath at first to part with her persuasion, Nelly came to comprehend that this world might still hold something pleasurable for her, even though Bertie lay in his grave.

Nigel Brooke was not slow to make his appearance at Little Bickton, as soon as he learnt that his wooing might be renewed, and try to convince her of the truth ; and as soon as the twelve-month had elapsed since Dr Monkton's death, he married his cousin, and took her off to Scotland with him.

But here let me confess that happiness was not all at once their portion. They loved each other dearly. Nigel Brooke anticipated every desire of his wife, and Nelly looked up to her husband with an affection which had so much reverence mingled with it, as almost to be worship. And yet, notwithstanding the devotion she exhibited towards himself, and the interest she evidently took in all the beauties of her new home, a quiet, subdued melancholy pervaded every feeling, and toned down every pleasure.

She was still as frank and trusting as she had ever been ; she said that she could never express to him one-half the gratitude she felt for his affection, and yet even whilst she spoke thus, her soft blue eyes would wander to the sky, and she seemed to remember that her home below was but a temporary thing.

She was as loving and as innocent as of old, but she was not the same Nelly that she had been at Little Bickton and at Orpington ; her look had lost its brightness and her voice its ring, and she was for ever reminding her husband, by her chastened demeanour, that a great sorrow had passed over her.

Nigel had hoped for more than this ; he had trusted that their mutual love and all the pleasures with which it was in his power to surround her, would have restored to her four-fold the happiness which had been so cruelly blighted.

He was disappointed—bitterly disappointed ; and, after a little while, he told her so.

"Dearest Nigel," she replied, "I am so grieved to hear you say it. I have everything that heart can wish for—indeed I have. But don't you think the fault lies in your hoping for too much ? If we are contented in this world, what more can we desire ? There is no such thing as happiness below—and it is

only the very young who expect to find it here. *I* did so once, I suppose from sheer ignorance of what life is, but I am wiser now, and have learned to be content with what Heaven sends me."

"Then my love has no power to make you happy, Nelly?" said Nigel, mournfully.

"*I am* happy, dearest husband," she replied, "quite happy, and perfectly content;" and then her loving glance met his without a flash of light in it, and left him as disappointed as before.

Yet she was so good—so entirely unselfish and devoted, that he could not blame her, even in his thoughts.

And it came at last. Happiness rushed in upon them both, in a rich bright stream, which flowed all the stronger from having been delayed a while.

It was on a spring morning—a day ever afterwards remembered by Nigel Brooke as the commencement of an unbroken vista of happy, cloudless years—that he was summoned to see his wife, for the first time, with baby on her breast.

"Oh! husband!" she exclaimed, drawing down his head, until it rested beside that of his new-born son, "oh! dearest husband, how could I ever be so wicked as to say that contentment was all we dare hope for in this world, when the memory of your patient, faithful love, borne in upon me at an hour like this, is happiness too great to be expressed, except in the same breath as thanks to Heaven."

And though by this time her children are fast growing up around her, and her hair may even here and there be streaked with gray, and neither Bertie's life nor love are things forgotten, it is not too much to affirm that in all the fair broad land of Scotland there is not a happier wife nor blither mother than dear NELLY BROOKE.

THE END.

Frederick Warne & Co., Publishers.

Price 1s. each Packet.

VICTORIA TALES AND STORIES.

Packet of 48 Books.

In Imperial 48mo, handsome Wrapper.

ALWAYS GOOD; or, The Holy Child.

And 47 other Books.

Packet of 24 Books.

THE YOUNG ARTIST; or, Perseverance can do a great deal.

And 23 other Books.

Packet of 12 Books, with Frontispiece to each.

LITTLE ARTHUR; or, Child Love.

And 11 other Books.

Packet A.

6 Books of 32 pp. Each with Frontispiece.

In post 8vo. Fancy Cover and handsome Wrapper.

WILLIAM AND RUPERT; or, The Half-holiday.

And 5 other Books.

Packet B.

6 Books of 32 pp. Each with Frontispiece.

THE PET SPARROW; or, Little Dicksie.

And 5 other Books.

Packet C.

4 Books of 48 pp. Each with Frontispiece.

With Covers and Wrapper embossed in Gold.

GENTLEMAN GEORGE; or, The Advantage of Reading.

And 3 other Books.

Packet D.

4 Books of 48 pp. Each with Frontispiece.

Packet E.

4 Books of 48 pp. Each with Frontispiece.

Packet F.

12 Books of 16 pp. Handsome Wrapper.

Edited by Miss YONGE, Author of "The Heir of Redclyffe."

Packet G.

12 Books of 16 pp. for Sunday Reading.

By the Rev. H. C. ADAMS.

WARNE'S SIXPENNY REWARD PACKETS.

Moral Narrative Books for Sunday Schools.

Imperial 48mo, picture Wrapper.

A. Packet of 24 Books.

D. Packet of 12 Books.

B. " 24 "

E. " 6 "

C. " 12 "

F. " 6 "

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

Frederick Warne & Co., Publishers.

BY ALEXANDER C. EWALD, ESQ.,

Of Her Majesty's Record Office, and Editor of "The Civil Service Guide."

NEW HISTORICAL WORK FOR STUDENTS.

In large crown 8vo, price 6s., cloth, 650 pp.

THE LAST CENTURY OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY.

A Reference Book, containing an Annotated Table of Chronology, Lists of Contemporary Sovereigns, a Dictionary of Battles and Sieges, and Biographical Notes of Eminent Individuals, from 1767 to 1867.

In crown 8vo, price 3s. 6d. each, cloth gilt.

A REFERENCE BOOK OF ENGLISH HISTORY,

Containing Tables of Chronology and Genealogy, a Dictionary of Battles, Lines of Biography, and a Digest of the English Constitution, from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar to 1866.

OUR CONSTITUTION:

A Record of the Origin and Gradual Progress of the Laws and Government of the British Empire, with Short Explanations of all Legal Terms.

In crown 8vo, price 2s. 6d. each, cloth.

THE CIVIL SERVICE GUIDE.

With Directions for Candidates, Examination Papers, Standards of Qualification, Amount of Salaries, and all necessary Information for those seeking Government Employment.

The Tenth Edition, revised from the latest authorities by ALEXANDER C. EWALD, Esq., of Her Majesty's Record Office.

Revised Edition of "How We are Governed." By A. C. EWALD.

HOW WE ARE GOVERNED;

OR,

THE CROWN, THE SENATE, AND THE BENCH.

By FONBLANQUE and HOLDSWORTH.

In crown 8vo, price 3s. 6d., cloth gilt.

THE POCKET DATE BOOK:

A Reference Book of
**UNIVERSAL HISTORY FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE
WORLD TO THE PRESENT DATE.**

By W. L. R. CATES.

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

Frederick Warne & Co., Publishers.

WARNE'S SIXPENNY 32mo. BOOKS.

Elegantly printed with new type, in modern style, cloth, gilt edges, with Coloured Frontispiece (Kronheim's Process).

LITTLE NETTIE.
ANNIE AND MARY
LITTLE BLACK HEN.
MAGGIE'S CHRISTMAS.
MARTHA'S VISIT.
GERTRUDE AND LILY
ALTHEA.
PRINCE IN DISGUISE.
BASKET OF FLOWERS.
ROBERT DAWSON.
BABES IN THE BASKET,
THE DAIRYMAN'S
DAUGHTER.
JANE HUDSON.
RUTH ELMER.
PHILIP AND ARTHUR.
BERTA AND SILVIO.

HATTY AND MARCUS.
KATE DARLEY
CAROLINE EATON.
TIMID LUCY
MARY BURNS.
LITTLE JOSEY
RICHARD HARVEY
HERMIT OF STENTORP
YOUNG COTTAGER.
GIFTIE, THE CHANGE-
LING.
CHILDREN ON THE
PLAINS.
JEWISH TWINS.
RHYMES FOR THE
LITTLE ONES.
TOM WATSON.

* * *A Fourpenny Edition is also ready of all the above, in fancy paper covers, with Plain Illustrations.*

WARNE'S SIXPENNY 18mo. BOOKS.

48 pages, cloth boards, gilt lettering, coloured frontispiece.

GENTLEMAN GEORGE; or, The Advantages of Reading.
WILLIE'S DISOBEDIENCE; or, The Cottage on the Cliff.
THE GARDEN: an Allegory. By C. D. BELL.
THE CHILDREN'S ISLAND. By Madame DE GENLIS.
LOST AND FOUND; or, The Adopted Daughter.
LIFE OF A BERLIN DOLL, written by Itself.
ALICE THORPE'S PROMISE; or, A New Year's Day.
LITTLE WILLIE; or, Patience Strong. B. C. D. BELL.
JANET'S BOOTS. By the Author of "Finette."
THE LITTLE SUNBEAM; or, Lizzie's Orange.
JULIA'S MISTAKE; or, The Fairy Valley.
THE SON OF THE PYRENEES; or, Perseverance.

* * *A Threepenny Edition is also ready of all the above, in fancy paper covers, with Plain Illustrations.*

Bedford Street, Covent Garden.

KEATING'S INSECT POWDER.

TRADE MARK.



This Powder is **QUITE HARMLESS** to **ANIMALS**, but unrivalled in destroying Fleas, Bugs, Emmets, Flies, Cockroaches, Beetles, Gnats, Mosquitoes, Moths in Furs, and every other species of Insect, in all stages of metamorphosis.

A small quantity of it placed in the crevices of a bedstead will destroy Bugs, and as long as it remains they will not re-appear.

It is indispensable to Travellers by Rail or Steamboat, and Visitors to the Sea-side, for protecting Bedding and Cabins from **FLEAS, BUGS, COCKROACHES, MOTHS, and MOSQUITOES.**

Rubbed into the skin of **DOGS, CATS,** or other **DOMESTIC ANIMALS,** it completely annihilates **FLEAS, TICKS,** and **ALL OTHER VERMIN.** It is extremely useful for sprinkling about the Nests of **POULTRY,** in **PIGEON HOUSES, GREENHOUSES, &c.** It is perfectly harmless in its nature, and may be applied without any apprehension, as it has no qualities deleterious to animals.

BLACK BEETLES.—Dusted about the haunts of these loathsome insects, it so stupefies them that they may be easily swept up and destroyed.

Placed in Drawers, Chests, or Wardrobes, it protects Furs, Woollen Clothes, &c., from Moths.

Testimonial.

BLACKHEATH.

DEAR SIR,—I gave a packet of your Insect Powder to a bedridden Patient of mine, who was a martyr to the annoyance of Fleas and other abominable insects, which completely destroyed them. The result was gratifying; and you are at liberty to publish this if you please.

Yours faithfully,

JOHN ROBINSON, M.D.,

MR. KEATING.

Formerly Lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence.

Sold in Packets, 1s., 2s. 6d., and 4s. 6d. each; or 1s. Packets, free by post, for twelve postage stamps, and 2s. 6d. on receipt of thirty-six. Also in Bottles, 1s. 2d., and with Bellows, 1s. 6d. and 3s. each, by **THOMAS KEATING, Chemist, 79, St. Paul's Churchyard, London;** and by all Druggists.

KEATING'S CHILDREN'S WORM TABLETS

A **PURELY VEGETABLE SWEETMEAT**, both in appearance and taste, furnishing a most agreeable method of administering a well-known remedy for **INTESTINAL OR THREAD WORMS.**

It is a perfectly safe and mild preparation, and is especially adapted for Children, being as harmless in its action as it is prompt and certain in its effects; and may be taken with impunity by the most delicate constitution.

Testimonial.

HURSLEY, WINCHESTER, Sept. 22, 1863.

MR. LITTLEHALES wishes for a Box of **WORM TABLETS** for Thread Worms, as they have done wonders for a child belonging to a man in his employ, and **Mr. Keating** may accept this as another testimonial of their efficacy.

Prepared and sold in Tins, 1s. 1½d. and 2s. 9d. each, by **THOMAS KEATING, Chemist, &c., 79, St. Paul's Churchyard, London, E.C.,** and retail by all Druggists.

Put up in Small Boxes "specially" for post, which will be forwarded on receipt of 14 Stamps.

